

*Thematic article*

# Conflicts in Physical Education Classes

## A Systems Theoretical Analysis of the Teacher's Perspective

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### Abstract

This article presents the results of a systems theoretical analysis of conflicts in physical education classes from the teacher's perspective. Building on the state of current research, a theoretical model to analyse the development and management of sport-related conflicts in the school setting is elaborated. This model is used to examine written assignments collected at university seminars on conflicts in a German sport institute. At these seminars, sport science students submitted 40 detailed descriptions of conflicts in physical education classes, which were either collected through an interview or experienced directly in their role as teachers. The empirical material is analysed using qualitative content analysis. Based on a fictive case that is developed for exemplification purposes, all collected cases are considered against the background of the developed model. It differentiates between trivial, stable, slightly, and highly escalated conflicts and examines suitable management strategies. The study concludes that trivial conflicts are common in physical education classes, that teachers use different strategies to manage them, and that this issue is dealt with differently at the organisational level. This preliminary model can be improved through further empirical research that compares different school forms and levels of education at the national and international level.

*Keywords:* Sport; conflict; physical education; systems theory

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### Introduction

The dual goal of physical education (PE)<sup>2</sup> in Germany is to achieve educational objectives in and through sport: promoting personal development through movement, play and sport, and teaching the culture of movement, play and sport (Kurz, 2008). One of PE's many educational objectives (Kähler, 1985) is the (independent) resolution of conflicts within this setting (Cachay, 1981). Therefore, conflicts that arise in PE classes and managing them are a historic and recurrent topic in sport pedagogy (Flavier et al., 2002; Hellison, 2011; Horrocks, 1978). While this research goal is not new, societal developments (e.g. changes in age distribution and migration phenomena) and reforms of the education system (e.g. the introduction of coeducational and inclusive PE) have led to continuous changes in all school forms in Germany (Van Ackeren et al., 2015) and internationally (Hörner et al., 2007). Consequently, research need to be constantly updated for meeting the problems and needs of pupils and PE teachers, who have to deal with conflicts that take place in a dynamic setting (Becker, 2006; Carroll et al., 1993; Hemphill et al., 2021; Hills, 2006; Isele et al., 2021; Sobiech, 2008). Sociology is a good candidate for broadening and differentiating the scientific discussion concerning conflicts in PE. Indeed, this perspective allows observing the phenomenon in a way, which is less entangled with pedagogical theory and practice and therefore more neutral.

Only few conflict theories have been broadly applied in sociological literature to analyse a large number of cases. Coser's conflict functionalism (1964), Dahrendorf's Marx-inspired analysis of conflict in modern industrial societies (Dahrendorf, 1959), Collins' macro-level multidimensional analysis of conflict and social stratification (1975), and Wallerstein's (capitalist) world systems theory (2011) are the most frequently quoted

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<sup>2</sup> PE is understood here as sporting activities that are organised within the scope of primary and the two secondary levels of the German school system. Extracurricular forms of school sport are excluded from this analysis.

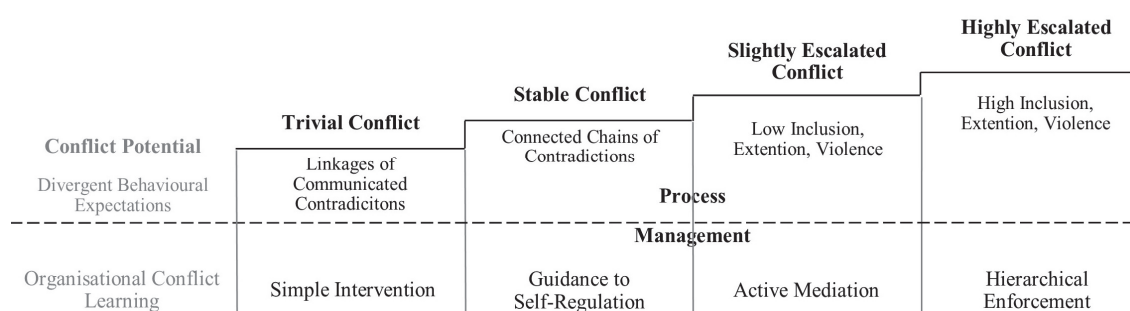
and applied macro-level theories (Johnson, 2008, p. 368). Instead, Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (2003), in general, and its theoretical conception of conflicts, in particular, have not been widely used outside the German-speaking scientific community.<sup>3</sup> For Luhmann (1982, p. XIII), the ultimate goal of systems theory is 'to develop a conceptual vocabulary that is refined, variegated, and supple enough to capture what he sees as the unprecedented structural characteristics of modern society'. Luhmann (1984, p. 19) also referred to systems theory as a *super theory* (*Supertheorie*) for describing society, with the aim of highlighting the universal ambition of his theoretical framework. The underlying objective of conducting this research on conflicts in PE classes based on a systems theoretical framework and publishing the results in English is to contribute to the current body of knowledge on this subject and to promote the use of this theory at the international level.

Against this background, this study examines the following research question: What types of conflicts arise in PE classes and how are they managed? Conflicts between pupils in PE classes from the teacher's perspective are analysed using a systems theory-based model. In a second step, the model is further developed based on empirical material collected by the author at a German sport institute on conflicts in sport. This catalogue is analysed using qualitative content analysis. Building on these results, this paper reflects on practical approaches for teachers to constructively deal with conflicts in PE while promoting pupils' autonomy.

### Theoretical framework

Sociology has long demonstrated that similar social conflicts arise over and over again, regardless of the individuals involved (Dahrendorf, 1959). This study builds on systems theoretical conflict theory, which was further developed by Ansgar Thiel (A. Thiel, 2002, 2003; A. Thiel et al., 2013)<sup>4</sup> on the basis of Luhmann's exploration of conflicts (2003). This sociological theory can be described as a network of ideas, representations and definitions that rely on shared theoretical foundations. One of the many issues analysed in this theoretical programme are conflicts, which are defined here as 'linkages of communicated contradictions' (A. Thiel, 2002, pp. 53). Compared with other conflict theories mentioned in the introduction, the significance of communication in Luhmann's systems theory fundamentally limits the understanding of conflict (A. Thiel, 2002, pp. 58). From this perspective, a circumvention of disputes by recourse to tolerance, indifference, affirmation or fear are considered cases of cooperation, not of conflict. This also implies rejection of mainstream typologies of 'latent and manifest' or 'hot and cold' conflicts. The discussion here focuses in particular on the phases of conflicts illustrated in Figure 1 and strategies to manage them in accordance with Thiel (2002, pp. 66–84).

**Figure 1.** Process and management of conflicts (modified from Thiel, 2002, p. 211)



According to the illustration of systems theoretical concepts in Figure 1, the process (top) and management (bottom) of a conflict are best explained by considering its premise (in grey) and its phases (in black):

Conflicts are preceded by the potential for conflict and by divergent behavioural expectations (A. Thiel, 2002, pp. 104). Every social situation has the potential of developing into a conflict at different levels, a potential that cannot be completely eradicated.

A trivial conflict arises when disagreement is expressed through verbal or physical dissent but does not evolve further. Such events resolve on their own without (or with basic external) intervention.

<sup>3</sup> The reason for this might be that part of Luhmann's work has only recently been translated into English and due to Luhmann's original affiliation with the influential American sociologist Talcott Parsons (Albert, 2004, pp. 22).

<sup>4</sup> The author translated all concepts of Ansgar Thiel's works from German into English.

Trivial events turn into stable conflicts when closely connected chains of contradictions emerge. According to systems theoretical literature, such conflicts are characterised by the following changes in the perception of social interactions (Luhmann, 1981, 2003; A. Thiel, 2002): events are interpreted from the perspective of opposition (polarisation); the parties are willing to inflict harm on each other as long as this is compatible with the conflict pattern and does not conflict too strongly with their own interests (willingness to harm); old stories are repeatedly dug up and serve as the basis for new assessments (distortion of time horizons). Guidance for self-regulation is used in stable conflicts if the conflict structures can still be broken up. A third party may facilitate constructive communication between the conflict parties by presenting his/her perception, clearly stating the points of dispute and reflecting on the situation, with the aim of reaching consensus.

In systems theory, 'escalation' refers to an uncontrolled increase in the scale of the conflict. Such conflicts also have an external impact and—depending on the degree of escalation—may have minor or major consequences. The antagonism between the parties generally creates a situation in which both parties' goal is to emerge victorious. The escalation of a conflict is characterised by three phenomena (A. Thiel, 2002, pp. 76–79): (i) it involves additional persons; (ii) the object of the conflict is magnified, and (iii) more violent means are used. This article distinguishes between 'slightly' and 'highly' escalated conflicts. The management strategy applied to slightly escalated conflicts is active mediation between the two parties, which consists of three stages. First, in the pre-negotiation stage, the conflicting parties must consent to this strategy, during which the (history of the) conflict is analysed and reflected on. In contrast to guidance for self-regulation, the discussions with the parties to the conflict are held separately during this stage. A procedural proposal is developed on the basis of these discussions. Second, during the negotiation stage, the parties come together to devise possible solutions. There is a risk that communication between the parties might break down or that one party might attempt to dictate the direction of the negotiations. Intensive support might be necessary to create trust between the conflicting parties. By the end of this stage, consensus is reached on how to resolve the conflict. Third, during the implementation stage, negotiations are formalised and control mechanisms established to monitor implementation of the agreements. The criteria for verifying compliance with the consensus are developed jointly and monitored long term by means of internal and external control measures. By contrast, in highly escalated conflicts, both parties have inflicted intentional harm on each other over a long period, and it is no longer possible to find a mutually acceptable solution. Such conflicts can only be resolved through hierarchical enforcement.

This theoretical model is adapted here because it was initially developed for the description and management of conflicts in elite sport, which differs substantially from PE classes. PE fosters psychomotor learning in a playful and/or physical activity setting to promote health and physical fitness (Anderson, 1989). From a systems theory perspective, the sport system is centred around the code 'win/lose' (Schimank, 1988, pp. 185), while the education system is centred around the code 'teachable/unteachable' (Kade, 1997; Luhmann et al., 2002). In the German language, PE is referred to as 'sports lessons' (*Sportunterricht*), which highlights the deep connection between these two partly incommensurable logics (Söll et al., 2005, pp. 43). As a form of physical activity characterised as recreational, governed by certain rules and centred around performance (Heinemann, 2007), some of the competitive aspects of sport clash with the characteristics of pedagogy in education. The inclusion of PE as a school subject in the German school curriculum was never seriously questioned but its legitimisation and its outsider role has been regularly debated (Bräutigam, 2014). Important consequences of this discrepancy are explained in the results section.

## Methodology

To develop the model described above, 40 detailed narrations of conflicts in PE classes collected during three university seminars on conflict in a German sport institute were examined. At the beginning of the seminars and before a scientific introduction of the topic, the students were asked to describe in depth a conflict in a sport setting that they had experienced either directly or indirectly. The most frequently mentioned were conflicts in PE classes from the teacher's perspective. Data were collected through (transcriptions of) interviews with PE teachers and written descriptions of conflicts the students had experienced personally during their internship in different schools. Aside from general indications on the duration of interviews (>45 minutes) or the length of the texts (>10 pages), there were no restrictions regarding the content, format or style of the text. The recommended length and the absence of a guideline aimed at stimulating a narrative, which is detailed and entails also streams of consciousness. All participants authorised the use of an anonymous version of their texts for research and teaching purposes.

A constructivist epistemological position supports both the theoretical and methodological approaches. This article serves as a second-order observer for the consideration of ex-post reconstructions of a perceived situation that, given the topic, might be extremely biased and influenced by emotions (Luhmann, 2001). To systematically and flexibly examine the meaning behind the data (Schreier, 2014), the analytical process both selected and reduced the contents of the data by successively assigning text passages to the categories of a coding system. The categories of this system were theory-led and included the phases of a conflict according to the systems theoretical framework explained in the past chapter: conflict potential, trivial, stable and escalated conflicts. However, the qualitative content analysis applied was not exclusively deductive and was instead open to inductive reasoning, which was applied when the reiterative attempt to connect the material and theory was not satisfactory. The interpretation of the catalogue of documents in the systems theoretical tradition (see: Luhmann, 1997, pp. 36–41) lies at the core of this study. According to the systems theoretical perspective, empirical research neither provides answers nor does it capture knowledge. Instead, it describes social phenomena, generates theories, and formulates further research questions, in this case concerning conflicts in PE classes.

## Results

This section explains the results of the analysis and interpretation of the sources through the category system based on the adopted process and management of conflicts (see Figure 1). To offset the abstraction of systems theory, *a fictive case is used to exemplify each phase of the conflict*, followed by its description and management strategies. Instead, exemplifying passages of the sources used are avoided to focus on the (systems) theoretical reflection of the phenomenon.

### *Conflict potentials*

*Alan and Benjamin attend different classes but participate in a mono-educational 9<sup>th</sup> grade PE class at a comprehensive school. Alan is taller than average, reserved and used to being better at sports than his peers, although he does not play competitive sports. However, he overestimates his abilities considerably. Benjamin is slim, generally talkative, and tends to protest while playing sports. He engages in club swimming in his leisure time. Outside of the water, his athletic skills are average. At the same time, he is generally highly competitive when it comes to sports and is a 'sore loser'. The atmosphere between these two pupils has been quite charged in past PE lessons and some degree of rivalry has developed. However, this situation has neither yet resulted in an argument nor has it initiated an intervention by the PE teacher.*

### *Description*

PE is a school subject that is centred around the body and movement, which is typical of sport (Serwe-Pandrick, 2013a). In organised sports, the potential for conflict is primarily generated by the ambition to gain a share of a limited resource, for example, to play as a striker in a football team's starting line-up (A. Thiel et al., 2013). Other conflict potentials in PE may arise in the school setting. Both scientific literature (Flavier et al., 2002) and the material collected within the scope of this study describe school as a setting with its own distinctive conflict potentials, such as bullying (Rigby, 2007) and examination stress (Putwain, 2009). Besides sharing structural conflict potentials with sport clubs and schools, PE has its own distinctive conflict potentials. It is important to note that German sports-related didactics experienced in the 1990s a "reflective turn", which led to a focus on 'reflective practices' in PE (Serwe-Pandrick, 2013b). The discrepancy between pupils' expectation to 'simply engage in sports' and teachers' educational objectives represents a distinct potential for conflict in PE classes in Germany. Moreover, PE differs from sport, among others, because of its compulsory nature of participation, the evaluation of performance (mark), the variety of activities, the (performance) heterogeneity of the pupils, and the (wilful) disregard of classmates within PE activities (Honneth, 2003; Scherler, 2000, pp. 37; Schierz, 2003, pp. 467). Consequently, these typical situations that arise in PE classes cannot be considered 'conflicts' from a systems theoretical perspective, but create a setting that is full of conflict potentials. The collected descriptions show that PE classes may be a catalyst or stage for the manifestation of pupils' negative emotions triggered by experiences that are entirely unrelated to the class itself. Other structural characteristics of PE, such as the school context, its compulsoriness and the presence of teachers, may, on the contrary, prevent conflict. At the very least, any contentious issues might partly be hidden from the teacher's watch to avoid punishment.

### *Management*

Conflict potentials cannot be completely avoided, because conflicts can emerge from a multitude of factors at the level of the individual, of the organisation and through interactions (Becker, 2006). All teachers' descriptions corroborated this complexity. The quality of teaching plays a decisive role in the development of conflicts (Hellison, 2011). However, the potential for conflict may arise even in well-planned and executed lessons in a socially harmonious (school-) class context, because conflicts can also emerge from pupils' personal expectations or from affect logic (A. Thiel et al., 2013, pp. 366–377). Disruptions in teaching and managing these is a recurrent theme in German sport pedagogy and didactics (Nolting, 2012; F. Thiel, 2016; Wettstein et al., 2018). They are defined as actions by students that violate the class's rules of conduct and may represent a potential for conflict. There is widespread agreement in the literature that the management of such conflicts is largely influenced by the teacher's ability to manage the conflict, that it is subject to the setting and application of rules, and depends on the group's social-emotional relationship.

### *Trivial conflicts*

*The already existing tension between Alan and Benjamin leads to an altercation: following a hard contact in a basketball game, Benjamin is in a state of excitement and utters some offensive words. Immediately, the two get into a physical scuffle.*

*The PE teacher intervenes verbally to calm down and pacify the two, who do not object to the intervention. The event does not seem to have any further consequences for the PE class.*

### *Description*

The material collected reveals that trivial conflicts are a frequent occurrence in PE classes. For example, when two pupils argue because a ball was not passed despite several requests or when a foul is committed. Such conflicts are classified as trivial events if they do not lead to any significant consequences for the parties involved. This is the case when the conflict resolves itself immediately after the confrontation, when the situation (or game) ends or at the latest by the end of the PE class.

Independent of the presence or absence of a disciplinary consequence for one or both of the pupils, such an insignificant event can be considered a trivial conflict. However, this is only the case if the parties involved decide (on their own or as a consequence of an intervention by the PE teacher) to end the conflict.<sup>5</sup> Such an event may not form the basis of a future stable conflict and must be an unrelated and exceptional conflict.

### *Management*

Often, trivial conflicts resolve quickly on their own or following a minor intervention by the PE teacher. In the cases included in the material collected, interventions usually consist of blowing a whistle and/or a request to stop and calm down. Trivial conflicts may sometimes need to be managed more carefully because they can cause negative psychophysical consequences for pupils and might create the basis for a stable conflict. If a dispute between classmates does not resolve on its own, or if it intensifies, the PE teacher can intervene to pacify the disputing parties. The timing and means of intervention depend on the teacher's experience, attitude and strategy (Hellison, 2011). A general trend identified in the cases included in this study is that teachers with the longest experience and the best self-perceived social skills tended to intervene later and stated that they take a more relaxed approach to such conflicts.

Trivial conflicts can develop rapidly and may lead to physical confrontation. In cases of physical violence, teachers are required to intervene. Such events might result in harsh punitive disciplinary measures, such as suspensions and reprimands, which in the cases at hand teachers try to avoid, however, because pupils who exhibit violent behaviours are often in need of help, not of punishment. Such cases are rare and despite the implications for managing them, they are not more complex than non-violent trivial conflicts (Söll et al., 2005, pp. 27–31).

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<sup>5</sup> Outward communication (e.g. the shaking of hands) as symbols of good will and conciliation are indications but not a guarantee for the end of a conflict.

### *Stable conflicts*

*Following their trivial conflict, the antagonism between the two classmates continues to smoulder like 'charcoal'. Although no additional event takes place initially, Alan and Benjamin continue to perceive each other as opponents, seek the possibility of revenge in subsequent classes, e.g. in the form of fouls, and repeatedly use their original conflict to weigh any new facts that arise. After their initial conflict, the PE teacher first plans to conduct a few 'conflict-proof' sports lessons. Only after one month does he/she concede to the class's demand to play a team sport with contact. Out of precaution, the teacher assigns Alan and Benjamin to the same team. His/her intention is to prevent the conflict from reigniting. Everything seems to be going well, the two pupils even seem to be getting along well during the game. At some point Benjamin calls on Alan to pass the ball to him, who, however, does not comply. An argument immediately ensues between the two.*

*After repeated quarrels between Alan and Benjamin, the teacher first seeks to clarify whether these are independent events or whether a stable conflict has evolved. He/she brings the two adversaries together and engages them in a conversation that not only sheds light on the situation but also on the consequences if the conflict continues. An agreement between the two to resolve the conflict is reached: Alan and Benjamin promise that they will avoid any further physical contact or squabbles during PE class. They promise each other and the teacher that they will respect this agreement.*

### *Description*

Only few cases of complex stable conflicts in PE classes are reported in the material. Most of the conflicts reported originated outside the PE class, which was only one of the stages of the conflict. Some of these events could be described as forms of rivalries and antipathies rather than stable conflicts, and therefore bear the potential for conflict. The intuitive, unstructured and incomplete feature of the collected material makes it impossible to systematically identify signs of polarisation, a willingness to harm and a distortion of the time horizon without over-interpreting the given event. Therefore, in this study, a conflict in PE is considered stable if it extends beyond one PE class, if it repeatedly disrupts the flow of the PE class or if it reduces the willingness of at least one classmate to participate in the class. Indeed, by producing its own structures, such a conflict disrupts 'normal' routines and communication processes. The negative consequences of the conflict might also affect spheres outside of school.

### *Management*

Stable conflicts need to be assessed because they develop a parasitic existence in the host context. Teachers have many strategies and possibilities to determine whether a conflict is stable, which might be guided by intuition, former experiences or be theory-based. The literature offers plenty of strategies to analyse (Becker, 2006) and manage (Hellison, 2011) such conflicts. According to the empirical material collected for this study, many PE teachers intuitively apply conflict management strategies that are similar to guidance for self-regulation. They promote constructive communication with the aim of breaking down the structure of the conflict, but also to preserve a positive atmosphere and consequently the quality of the PE class. Thereby, PE teachers sometimes withdraw from the conversation or actively lead it and formulate suggestions.

### *Escalated conflicts*

*After repeated arguments and threats, Benjamin seeks the support of an older pupil who is on his swim team and who attends 11<sup>th</sup> grade at the same school. By being approached by an unfamiliar older pupil who orders him to leave Benjamin alone, Alan feels threatened and turns to his circle of friends for support. Two scenarios might emerge from this situation:*

*1 – In case of a slight escalation, the conflict does not intensify further and does not lead to a major confrontation. The PE teacher and/or other teachers intervene to de-escalate the conflict. He/she leads separate discussions with the conflicting parties and proposes solutions. In addition to calls for reflection, the harsh disciplinary consequences in case of continuation of the dispute are outlined. Once a basis for compromise has been reached with each party separately, the PE teacher brings Alan and Benjamin together and, in a mediated conversation, asks them to reflect on the situation and to end the conflict. The two promise each other and the teacher that they will respect this agreement. Alan and Benjamin are instructed to compare the self-perception of their individual actions with the perceptions of their classmates and of the PE teacher every month throughout the school year.*

2 – *In case of an intense escalation, the conflict intensifies further and culminates in a brawl with several participants outside the school. The head of the school suspends both pupils for a week and warns them that the consequence of another brawl will be a reprimand for both.*

#### *Description*

Anecdotal descriptions of escalated conflicts are rare in the material collected for this study and are unlikely to arise in PE classes. Interpretative issues surface when dealing with this type of conflict, because ‘escalation’ might be associated with violence, when in fact complexity is a necessary condition for this type of conflict to arise. This study distinguishes between slightly and highly escalated conflicts. As is the case in the phases of other process-based conflict theories, these two conflict types generally overlap, and the presence of concrete negative physical, psychological, social or material consequences is used here to distinguish between these two types of conflicts. Against the background of this distinction, two of the reported cases can be considered as slightly escalated conflicts. Other reported events of violence in PE classes could not be connected to pre-existing complex conflicts and are therefore classifiable as trivial or stable conflicts. A PE class against the background of a polarising, extended and violent already existing conflict is an extremely challenging situation, which absorbs most of the class’s energy and time. The organisational structure of school is a facilitating factor, which enhances the possibility of successfully managing such a scenario. However, the PE experiences show that the deconstruction of the conflict is a priority, which foregoes any other curricular aspect of the PE class.

#### *Management*

Even when two pupils are at loggerheads, it is still important to find ways to foster a climate of coexistence, because school usually consists of fixed groups (classes). If the conflict has only escalated slightly, the theoretical model recommends active mediation between the two parties as a conflict management strategy based on three steps.<sup>6</sup> The collected material reveals that while similar strategies were applied, the teachers skipped or reduced some of the steps due to time constraints. In turn, conflict resolution through precipitous decisions and under time pressure carry the risk of deteriorating the situation further (Flavier et al., 2002). One teacher argued that pupils should express their subjective views and opinions on conflict situations face to face early on. As the conflict within the class widened and factions began to form, one teacher implemented the dialectic activity of a ‘sitting circle’ (Hellison, 2011) to discuss and jointly resolve the problem. Such team-building measures and distinct pedagogical measures were implemented thereafter to strengthen the class community.

In case of highly escalated conflicts, which were not mentioned in the collected material, PE teachers or a higher authority figure (e.g. the school principal) must use their institutional authority and sanctioning power (e.g. suspensions and reprimands) to resolve the conflict against the will of the parties involved. Such measures are highly effective because of the authoritative status of teaching staff, and should primarily be implemented to protect the pupils (Flavier et al., 2002). The problem of hierarchical enforcement lies in the lack of reconciliation between the conflicting parties and bears the risk of causing new conflicts or an intensification of the conflict outside of school. As in the case of violent trivial conflicts, the cases analysed demonstrate that teachers might decide to avoid punishment through hierarchical enforcement. Instead, they prefer to involve others, such as school social workers or school psychologists, to help resolve the conflict rather than punish the parties to the conflict.

### **Conclusion**

As Coser (1964) observes, addressing realistic conflict issues can contribute to social integration. Although they can have functional effects as well, conflicts might be one of the most relevant dysfunctional factors in PE classes and studying them is therefore of scientific relevance, in both theoretical and applied terms. This article focuses on conflicts in PE and how to manage them based on a systems theoretical framework.

After having considered the conflict potentials in PE classes, this article discusses the phases of a typical conflict process (trivial, stable, slightly and highly escalated) and suitable management strategies (basic intervention, guidance for self-regulation, active mediation and hierarchical enforcement). These approaches

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<sup>6</sup> The pre-negotiation, negotiation and implementation steps are described in the theoretical framework.

progressively reduce the responsibility of the conflicting parties: the more advanced a conflict is, the more important the role of the third (external) party. It is assumed here that PE teachers can carry out the functions of the intervening third party. However, they might be perceived as biased and may therefore not be effective as conflict mediators. In this case, the use of another third party or a professional mediator to resolve the dispute would be preferable.

All PE teachers involved had experience with conflicts and perceived these as having different intensities, which also depend on school type and grade. Most teachers base their approach on instinct and previous experiences while others rely on specific knowledge acquired through self-education, training courses or based on official approaches to conflicts advocated by the school. The teachers apply a relatively heterogeneous portfolio of management strategies to intervene and resolve conflicts. Instead of avoiding latent conflicts, many encourage independent and constructive management of conflicts taught in the context of PE as a way to increase pupils' personal and social skills (Flavier et al., 2002).

This last paragraph discusses some methodological and theoretical limitations of the study and outlines recommendations for future research. The study examines a catalogue of documents submitted by sport science students. The material collected is neither representative of Germany, in general, nor of the federal state North Rhine-Westphalia, specifically. Despite the heterogeneity of the documents included in the catalogue, the use of content analysis allowed for a structured and comparative review of the documents. As the material entails a vast amount of emotional, metaphorical and indirect connotations, a re-analysis based on methodologies designed to examine the informal aspects of documents, such as the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2013) and the grounded theory (Glaser et al., 2009), could unearth further interesting aspects of the narrations.

Three main theoretical issues emerged during the research process. First, the narrow scope and short format of this article prevents a full realisation of the advantages and potential of systems theory (Willke, 2006), which as a general theory allows the inclusion of several additional theoretical tools and concepts in the analysis of conflicts. Second, systems theory allows for a drastic reduction and specification of conflicts, which is beneficial for analytical purposes. However, this also creates interpretative problems when working with empirical material, because the same terms are used with widely differing meanings. Third, in addition to distinct theoretical concepts and definitions, the tools for analysing the different phases of a conflict are as ambiguous as they are in alternative theories. The model can be further developed using additional empirical research, which could compare different school forms and levels of education at the international level. Pupil-pupil conflicts were used in this study to exemplify and analyse conflicts. However, other relevant constellations exist, such as conflicts involving individuals, three parties, groups and organisations (Schwarz, 2013), as well as entirely different typologies of conflicts that are found in the literature (Glasl, 2020). The systems theoretical analysis of other conflict constellations in PE classes would further broaden this discussion.

In the future, sociological research on conflicts in the setting of school could be used to develop specific training for PE teachers, which use the systems theory (or other complex theories) for stimulating analysis and management skills concerning the handling of conflicts.

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