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How teachers understand and strategize about emerging conflicts

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Abstract

This article concerns what have been variously called mild misbehaviours, minor distractions or emerging conflicts, i.e. situations of mild tension between the teacher and pupils in the classroom. The article responds to calls for further studies on *the link* between how teachers understand these emerging conflicts and the strategies they suggest to handle them. We carried out two studies on primary school teachers in Sweden, using a qualitatively driven mixed-method design, i.e. the studies were carried out sequentially using different qualitative methods. The first study, the main study, based on individual interviews with 20 teachers, used a phenomenographic approach, capturing these teachers' different understandings of emerging conflict. The second study, the supplemental study, based on six group interviews with 18 teachers, built on the main study and used a hermeneutic approach, capturing how these teachers link a certain understanding of emerging conflicts to certain themes of suggested strategies. By utilizing this design, we were able to investigate the aforementioned link and build a model of nine different understandings, each linked to one to four strategy themes. Altogether, 22 different strategy themes, together encompassing a multitude of separate strategies,

were recognized and linked to the nine different understandings. The results suggest that teachers have a more divergent and nuanced understanding of emerging conflicts, and how to handle them, than earlier studies of this link have reported. The results give valuable insights into developing more accurate quantitative surveys as well as more suitable teacher training programmes.

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The article addresses *the link* between how teachers understand emerging conflicts, involving them and their pupils, and the strategies they suggest to handle them.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Previous research has been mainly classroom management based using quantitative methods. Ours is conflict resolution based and uses qualitative methods. The results suggest that our approach gives a more nuanced picture of the link and introduces possible new perspectives, allowing two legitimate parties in these situations of emerging conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

As professional educational leaders in the classroom, teachers are required to balance the individual and collective needs of their students, students' families, themselves, school administrators and educational policy-makers. In particular, teachers are expected to appropriately address situations of tension or conflict between themselves and pupils in a classroom setting; teachers develop an understanding of these situations, a language with which to talk about them, and skills and strategies for addressing them.

In this article, we will focus on tense situations of a minor kind, such as pupils getting out of their seats, talking out of turn or distracting other children. These are situations that seem somewhat innocuous but may evoke mild irritation and cause tension between the teacher and the pupils, as the actions of one of the parties interfere with the goals of the other parties (Hakvoort, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2014). The project reported in this article focuses on the teachers' perspective, and investigates how they understand these kinds of tense situations and how they strategize about them. We will connect the project to research from two of the major strands of research on tense situations in the classroom: *classroom management* and *conflict resolution* (Hakvoort, 2019). Classroom management researchers have found that of the tense situations that surface in the classroom, teachers find these minor ones

both most common and most troublesome (Glock, 2016; Houghton et al., 1988; Little, 2005; Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2014; Wheldall & Merrett, 1988). Despite drawing on somewhat different theoretical resources, researchers from both strands have recognized that further studying these minor tense situations, how they are understood and how they are handled may aid both in decreasing the frequency with which they occur in classrooms and in preventing them from escalating into situations that are more difficult to manage and resolve (Hakvoort, 2019).

In general, we have learned quite a lot from these two strands of research when it comes to tense situations in the classroom. Classroom management researchers have, for example, shown us that teachers spend a lot of time dealing with these situations (Houghton et al., 1988; Kwok, 2019; Little, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2014). From these researchers, we also know that tense situations are a leading contributor to teachers' job stress (Dicke et al., 2014), teachers' burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Bibou-Nakou et al., 1999) and teachers leaving their profession (Manning & Butcher, 2005; Petoda, 2007). Conflict resolution researchers have also provided us with valuable knowledge. For instance, they have made us aware of tense situations as invaluable opportunities for learning (Parker & Bickmore, 2020; Souto-Manning, 2014). They have further shown us that systematic interventions to handle tense situations using conflict resolution tools are not as easy as one might think, as the findings have been indecisive with regard the effects of these tools on diminishing the frequency of tense situations (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007; Parker & Bickmore, 2020; Smith et al., 2002). Variables such as the school and classroom context, the content of the intervention, students' age, preparation time and training hours influenced outcomes. Nonetheless, researchers from both these strands have highlighted areas that need further investigation. One such area is the link between how teachers make sense of, perceive or understand these tense situations and what strategies they choose for handling them (Hodges Kulinna, 2007).

While there is a need for further research, some studies within the two strands, particularly from the classroom management approach, have indeed focused on this link (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981; Dogan, 2016; Goyette et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007; Hughes et al., 1993; Koutrouba, 2013; Soodak & Podell, 1994; Özgan, 2016). The results from these studies are somewhat mixed. One finding is that teachers tend to understand these tense situations as being caused by the pupil and/or the pupil's family rather than the teacher him- or herself (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981; Goyette et al., 2000; Koutrouba, 2013; Soodak & Podell, 1994). Teachers also seem, in general, to favour strategies that could, in a broad sense, be described as positive reinforcement (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Koutrouba, 2013), and they choose to handle these situations on their own in the confines of the classroom (Hughes et al., 1993; Koutrouba, 2013). There also seems to be some marginal evidence for teachers understanding these situations in light of their severity and choosing strategies for addressing a situation in relation to its severity, suggesting a possible link between severity and strategy (Goyette et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007). Evidence is ambiguous, however, on the connection between how teachers attribute causality in such situations and their strategy choices; that is, a possible link between causal attribution and strategy choice needs further investigation. Brophy and Rohrkemper (1981), Bibou-Nakou et al. (2000) and Soodak and Podell (1994) showed evidence of such a link, while Goyette et al. (2000), Hodges Kulinna (2007) and Hughes et al. (1993) did not find it evident.

The studies that have addressed the link have certain features in common. Almost all of them (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Goyette et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007; Hughes et al., 1993; Koutrouba, 2013; Soodak & Podell, 1994) were quantitative in nature, and except for Bibou-Nakou et al. (2000), they all investigated the link with regard to the entire severity spectrum of tense situations, that is, from mild, to moderate, to severe.

Considering that classroom management researchers have shown that minor tense situations are the most common and troublesome tense situations in the classroom, and that both classroom management and conflict resolution researchers see the handling of these situations as especially important for improving the overall classroom climate, it could be argued that a special focus on these minor situations would be highly valuable. Of the studies mentioned focusing on the understanding-strategy link, only Bibou-Nakou et al. (2000) gave full attention to minor situations. However, this study used a quantitative design. One limitation of such a design (which was pointed out by the researchers themselves) is that it makes use of predefined categories and may therefore miss important ways of understanding these situations as well as strategies linked to these understandings. With the project reported in this article, we wanted to circumvent this design limitation and delve deeper into the link between teachers' understandings of these minor tense situations and the strategies employed to address them; we have employed qualitative inductive methods to capture as many of the nuances as possible. As we come from a conflict resolution tradition, we will therefore call these situations of minor tension *emerging conflicts* (Hakvoort & Olsson, 2014; Hakvoort, 2020). Classroom management researchers prefer using the terms *mild misbehaviours* or *minor distractions* (Hakvoort, 2019; Poulou & Norwich, 2000).

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the project is to investigate how teachers understand emerging conflicts and whether different understandings inform teachers' choice of strategies to address them. As these emerging conflicts are most common in primary school settings (Beaman et al., 2007), we chose to limit the investigation to teachers in primary school.

The research questions guiding the study were:

1. How do primary school teachers understand emerging conflicts?
2. Are there different strategies linked to the different ways of understanding emerging conflicts?

THE SWEDISH CONTEXT IN SHORT

This project was carried out in Sweden. The country is situated in a region of tranquillity (Hakvoort, 2010) and is known for democratic education and its ideas on bringing pupils together in school regardless of individual conditions for learning, i.e. what has been called *a school for all* (Dahlstedt et al., 2011; Hakvoort & Olsson, 2014). Thus, understanding and respect for diversity are well integrated into Swedish school policies, and are included in formal mission descriptions for teachers, who are expected to act inclusively and to encourage pupils to become democratic citizens. Since 2011, conflict resolution has been a mandatory course in all teacher education, including teaching student teachers the various dimensions of conflicts and constructive ways to manage them. Nonetheless, one of the major teachers' unions reports that teachers still express that they face many difficult and tense situations, and struggle to manage them in an adequate way (Lärarförbundet, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This project followed a qualitatively driven mixed-method design as developed by Morse et al within the field of health research (Morse, 2003, 2009; Morse & Cheek, 2014, 2015; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). This kind of design comes in different styles. The one we use is presented as *QUAL→qual*. This means that two qualitative studies are carried out sequentially using different methods. The *QUAL* study (henceforth called *the main study*) is the core or dominant component, itself a complete study using one qualitative method. The *qual* study (henceforth called *the supplemental study*) is an additional sequential study building on the main study with results to be interpreted in relation to the main study but using another qualitative method. Eventually the results from the *two* studies are merged into a *result narrative* showing the combined results and their relations (see Figure 1).

Data gathering

Our intention in the main study was to capture and describe the different ways primary teachers (grades 1–6) understand emerging conflicts between teacher and pupil within a classroom setting. To explore this, we used a phenomenographic methodology, a methodology that has specifically been developed to capture and describe the different ways people understand a specific phenomenon (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997).

In line with the phenomenographic methodology, we used individual in-depth semi-structured interviews, starting with a probe, to gather the empirical data (Lönngren et al., 2017; Marton & Booth, 1997). The probe we used to encourage the primary school teachers to talk about emerging conflict was an out-of-seat situation where a pupil leaves his/her seat when the teacher is talking to the class. This probe was followed by questions such as:How do you understand a situation like this? What would you do? Is this a conflict? Why, or why not? Where does the conflict start? The intention was to take the teachers to the point when a situation goes from not being a conflict to being a potential conflict. In this way, we gave the teachers as rich an opportunity as possible to talk about emerging conflicts.

In the main study, 20 teachers (T1–T20) were interviewed. The teachers selected came from four different public primary schools (grades 1–6, with students aged 7–12). These schools differed in the number of immigrant pupils attending the school and the percentage of parents with a secondary school education qualification (40–80%), and the participating teachers differed in gender (15 female and five male) and teaching experience (2–38 years). The overall intention with the diversity among the selected teachers was to get as wide a variation in ways of understanding emerging conflict as practically possible. The interviews lasted 1–1.5 h, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The intention of the supplemental study, being a sequential study, was to follow up on the findings from the main study. In this case we wanted to explore how primary school teachers strategize about handling emerging conflicts between teachers and pupils in the classroom when they are asked to apply only one specific way of understanding such a conflict at a time.

For the supplemental study, a hermeneutic methodology was used. Scholars have acknowledged a close relationship between the phenomenographic and hermeneutic traditions, the latter being seen as more open to the way data is gathered and better able to explore a phenomenon from a wider perspective than the phenomenographic approach, which is specialized for grouping and describing different ways of understanding a phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997; Sandberg, 1994, 1996).

In the case of the supplemental study, the empirical data was gathered through focus group interviews. The main idea behind using focus groups rather than individual interviews
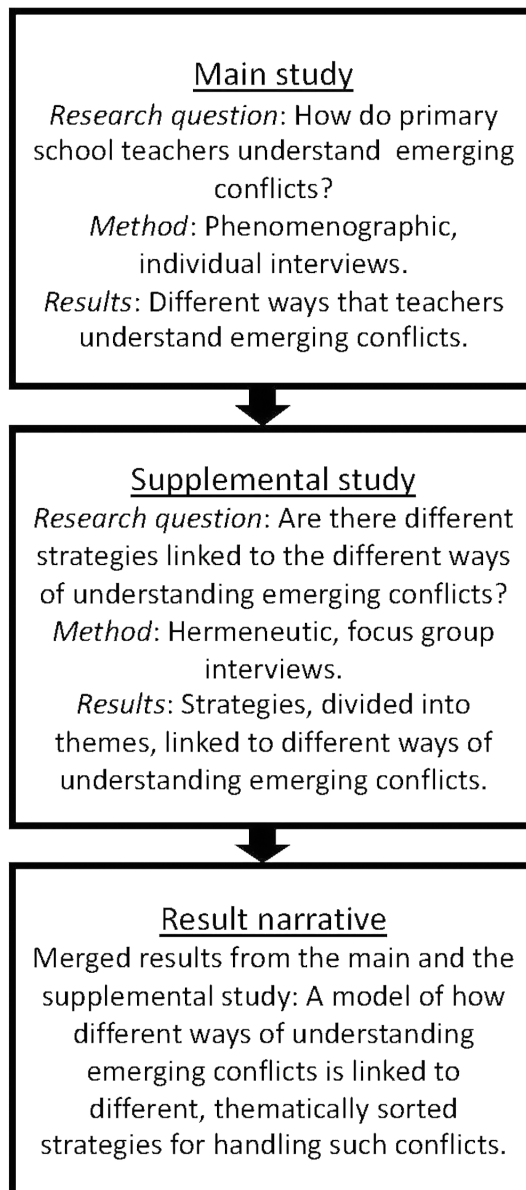
Main study

Research question: How do primary school teachers understand emerging conflicts?
Method: Phenomenographic, individual interviews.
Results: Different ways that teachers understand emerging conflicts.

Supplemental study

Research question: Are there different strategies linked to the different ways of understanding emerging conflicts?
Method: Hermeneutic, focus group interviews.
Results: Strategies, divided into themes, linked to different ways of understanding emerging conflicts.

Result narrative

Merged results from the main and the supplemental study: A model of how different ways of understanding emerging conflicts is linked to different, thematically sorted strategies for handling such conflicts.

FIGURE 1 Description of the methodological structure of the project

was, on the one hand, the potential for inducing discussions that could lead to a deeper penetration of the meaning of each of the understandings that the group was to take as a starting point, and, on the other hand, to induce a wider range of suggested strategies.

To make it possible for the teachers in the focus groups to suggest as many strategies as they could come up with from the perspective of a certain way of understanding an emerging conflict, we gave each member of the groups the findings from the main study. This was done by sending the members of each group a handout with the main study findings one week before the focus group was to meet. These handouts presented the members of each group with the overall findings in a brief table and more elaborate descriptions of three specific understandings, which they were asked to discuss in the focus group interview (for an example of such a handout, see Appendix A). We limited the number of understandings

each group was asked to discuss to three, to avoid the interviews being too long and to encourage the groups to stay on track. Different combinations of understandings were supplied to different groups, so that each of the nine ways of understanding was given to two groups (see Appendix B). At the time of the interview, the group was told that they were going to discuss strategies on each understanding in turn and that it was important that they really tried to take on the perspective of the understanding in focus when discussing strategies. Before starting the discussion on each understanding, the group was allowed to have a brief discussion on how they had interpreted the understanding at hand, in order to have an opportunity to form a common base. They were also allowed to ask the interviewer for clarity concerning their interpretation. The interviewer's initial question to the group for each understanding was: 'If one understands emerging conflict as in understanding X, what might one do?'

In the supplemental study, six focus group (G1–G6) interviews with 18 primary school teachers from nine public schools were conducted. Each focus group consisted of three teachers. The participating teachers differed in gender (13 female and five male) and teaching experience (5–39 years), and the schools at which they taught were located in areas of varying socio-economic status. The overall intention of our sampling in the supplemental study was to have a broad diversity among the selected teachers in order to get as large a number of possible strategies linked to the different understandings from the main study as practically possible. An additional intention, satisfied by interviewing teachers different from those interviewed for the main study, was to test the communicative potential and the meaningfulness of the results from the main study; this was, in other words, one way to verify the pragmatic validity of the results of the main study (Åkerlind, 2012; Rescher, 1977). The focus group interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 h, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

For both studies, the three authors constituting the research group gathered at recurring workshop-like meetings to analyse the data. The main purpose of making this a collaborative effort was to allow for diverse views of the data, to reduce the risk of missing relevant interpretations, and for those most familiar with the data, i.e. the research group, to have a thorough critical discussion about the interpretations proposed.

For the main study, following the phenomenographic route, the transcripts of the interviews were first read by the research group to find the sections where the interviewees reflected on their understanding of emerging conflict (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997). At this stage, an initial discussion was held among the researchers on possible ways to look at these sections in terms of different ways of understanding, but the main focus was on isolating meaning units in the text that corresponded to all the different ways of understanding emerging conflict. After this stage of analysis, the group literally cut out the highlighted sections from the interview excerpts to form what in phenomenographic terms is called a *pool of meaning*. This pool of meaning then formed the basis of the subsequent and dependent analyses.

The next step for the group was to organize the different ways of understanding emerging conflict found within the pool of meaning into what in phenomenographic terms is called an *outcome space* (that is, a category system). Such a category system represents the different ways of understanding emerging conflict at a collective level, where individual teachers contribute to one or more specific ways of understanding (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997).

Through this process, understandings were developed by discerning similarities in the data that could constitute or coalesce into a distinct understanding, and by discerning

differences in the data that supported differentiation. The process also involved the group returning to the original interviews from which the pieces of text in the pool of meaning were cut, to inspect the context of each extract. The whole of this process was lengthy, time-consuming, labour-intensive and interactive, and it entailed the continual sorting and re-sorting of data until the different 'understandings' found by the research group stabilized and could be formed into a coherent and logical category system.

For the supplemental study, a hermeneutic approach to analysis was used. In a general sense, the research group followed the route of the hermeneutic circle to delve into the data from our focus group interviews, looking for strategies mentioned in response to each of the different ways of understanding emerging conflict found in the main study (Bontekoe, 1996; Gadamer, 1975; Paterson & Higgs, 2005).

The research group first read through each of the transcripts looking for passages that mentioned or suggested strategies. When this was done, the group listed all strategies found in the data in relation to each different understanding. It should be stressed that in this process the group did not consider whether a strategy was mentioned just once or more times, or whether the strategies mentioned were given different priorities. Further, it was enough that one of the teachers in the group mentioned or suggested a strategy for it to be listed as a strategy.

After this initial phase, the group compared the strategies found for each understanding, discussing potential similarities and differences. The group then returned to the transcripts to look for context relating to the strategies mentioned. This was followed by a deeper analysis of the strategies connected to each understanding in an effort to group the individual strategies into themes related to that particular understanding. When initial themes had been formulated, the group compared these themes across the different understandings, discussing similarities and differences. When something seemed unclear, the group returned to the interviews for context. The group persisted in this process, shifting between the interviews, strategies and emerging themes until it felt that the themes were sufficiently established and empirically well grounded.

During the process, the preliminary analysis and results of the project as a whole (the main study and the supplemental study) were checked for communicative validity (Åkerlind, 2012; Kvale, 1996) at conferences such as the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in New York, 2018, and the European Educational Research Association conference in Hamburg, 2019.

RESULT NARRATIVE

As discussed, the project presented here consists of two studies: the main study[1] and the sequential supplemental study (Morse, 2003, 2009; Morse & Cheek, 2014, 2015; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). The analysis of the empirical data from the interviews with individual teachers in the main study yielded nine different ways of understanding emerging conflict. The analysis of the empirical data from the focus group interviews in the supplemental study, grounded in the nine different understandings from the main study, yielded 22 different strategy themes. In the following result narrative, the results from the two studies are merged in a sequential model (see Figure 2) describing the link between teachers' understandings of emerging conflict and their strategies for addressing it. The model serves two functions. First, it briefly explicates the different ways of understanding emerging conflict (A–I) found in the main study and the different strategy themes (1–22) found in the supplemental study. Second, it depicts the relationship between certain understandings and certain strategy themes. In what follows, each understanding and the strategy theme(s) linked to it will be described, in accordance with the order outlined in Figure 2.
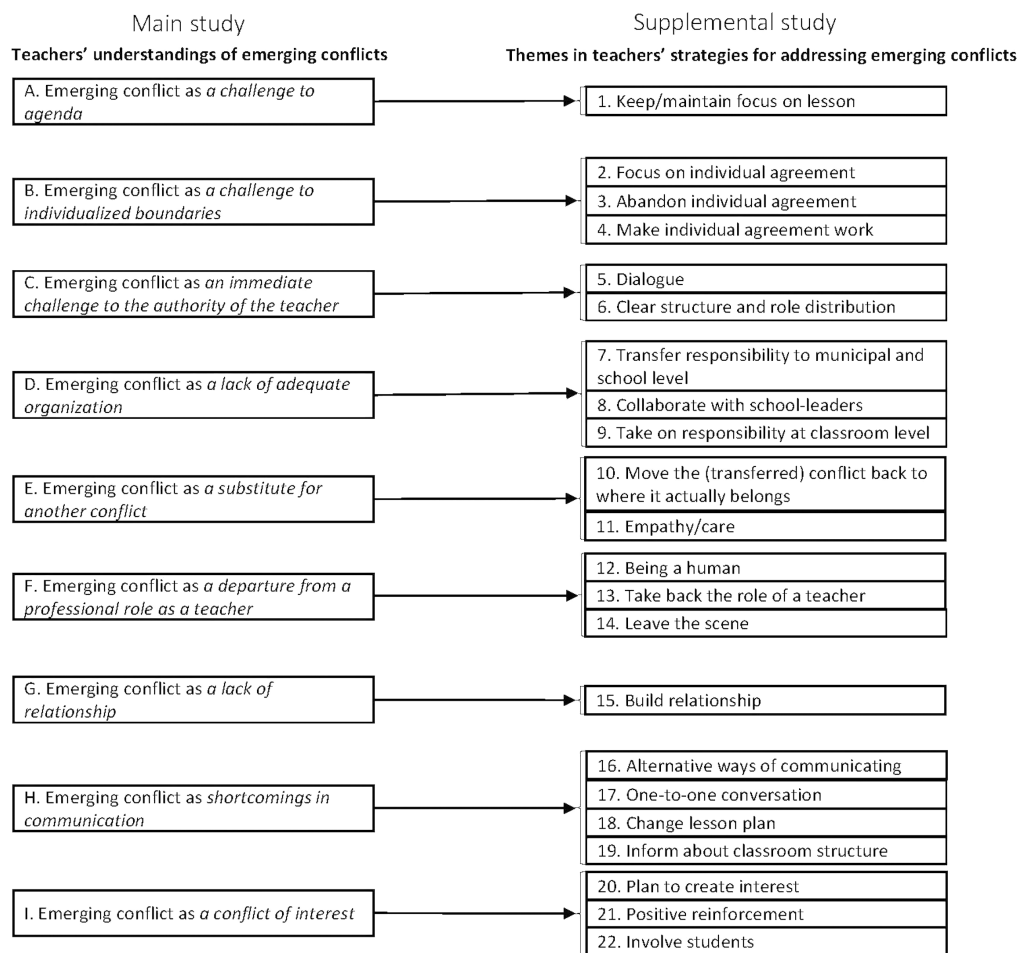
FIGURE 2 A model of teachers' understandings and strategy themes concerning emerging conflicts

Understanding A – Strategy theme 1

In understanding A, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a pupil challenging the teaching agenda (i.e. the teacher's formal responsibility for teaching subject knowledge). The teachers express this view by referring to the teaching as, for example, a 'sacred moment' (T7) or that the children in the class 'have a right to learn' (T10). That a challenge to this teaching agenda might create an emerging conflict is expressed by referring to different remarks directed at the pupil presenting the challenge, 'you are expected to sit down and listen' (T7) and 'keep quiet or you have to leave the classroom' (T10).

When taking the perspective of understanding A, one or more teachers in focus groups G1 and G4 express a view that could be described in terms of a theme (1) aimed at keeping or maintaining focus on the lesson. This theme includes strategies like: ignoring (G1, G4), lowering voice (G1), quick reprimand (G4) and distracting by doing something unexpected (G1).

Understanding B – Strategy themes 2–4

In understanding B, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a pupil challenging a personalized, and agreed upon, boundary for accepted behaviour (in line with the teacher's mission to act inclusively). These boundaries are based on the teacher's knowledge of the particular pupil. The teachers express this view by first referring to the need to know the pupils, for example, 'I have had a child' (T1) and 'you know your class' (T8). Based on this, the teachers then refer to how they adapt individualized, agreed-upon boundaries for when a conflict might emerge to different pupils: '[when] some pupils stand up … you react immediately … but for some pupils … he or she can walk a bit down there in the classroom' (T1), 'according to whether we might have agreed on something, me and the pupil' (T8).

When taking the perspective of understanding B, one or more teachers in focus groups G3 and G5 express views that could be described in terms of three different strategy themes. One theme (2) is focused on the individual agreement – trying to make the student aware of the agreement. Here one or more teachers suggest strategies like making signs (G3, G5), seeking eye contact (G3, G5) and confirming positive behaviour (G3, G5) in relation to the pupil in question. Another theme (3) is focused on abandoning the agreement, with one or more teachers suggesting strategies like letting the pupil leave the classroom momentarily (G3), or for a prolonged period of time, or even permanently (G5). Yet another theme (4) is focused on facilitating a classroom climate that supports the idea of individualized boundaries. Strategies include working with the pupils to encourage them to espouse a narrative of individual differences (G3, G5), and also working to clarify the differences between, for instance, lesson time and break time (G3).

Understanding C – Strategy themes 6 and 7

In understanding C, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a direct challenge to their position as the authority in the classroom. The teachers express this view by saying that a conflict emerges, for example, if a pupil says something to the teacher, like 'shut up' (T6), that contests the prevalent hierarchy in the classroom, i.e. when a pupil directly 'challenges' (T2) the teacher's 'position as a teacher, to see who is the one in charge in the classroom' (T2).

When taking the perspective of understanding C, one or more teachers in focus groups G2 and G6 express views that could be described in terms of two themes. The first (5) is dialogue, with one or more teachers suggesting strategies such as talking about the incident(s) with the whole class (G6) or having a one-to-one conversation (G2, G6) with the particular pupil. The second theme (6) is working to establish clear structures and role distributions for classroom interactions, with one or more teachers suggesting strategies such as clearly occupying the position of leader in the classroom (G6) and working with the class on agreements relating to classroom behaviour (G2).

Understanding D – Strategy themes 7–9

In understanding D, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning deficiencies in the school organization, thus suggesting that the cause lies beyond the control of the teachers and pupils. The teachers express this view, sometimes by referring directly to the school being 'badly organized' (T5) or sometimes more subtly, by saying that there are 'too few adults' and 'too big classes' (T10). That this lies beyond the

control of the pupils and the teachers is expressed, for example, by saying that the 'pupils who need support, they don't get it' (T5) although the teachers are trying their best to 'conduct their lessons at the same time as they are trying to reach these children' (T5).

When taking the perspective of understanding D, one or more teachers in focus groups G1 and G4 express views that could be described in terms of three different themes. The first (7) concerns transferring responsibility to the municipal and school level. Here one or more teachers state that what needs to happen is a political change relating to how resources are distributed to schools in the municipality, and as such it is beyond their control (G1, G4). The second (8) concerns teachers collaborating with school leaders. Here one or more teachers talk about strategies such as working to find a more suitable school for a certain pupil (G1) or reallocating resources so there could be more than one teacher in the classroom at the same time (G1). The third theme (9) concerns taking on responsibility at the classroom level. In this case, one or more teachers suggest strategies like trying new ways to organize the lessons (G1, G4).

Understanding E – Strategy themes 10 and 11

In understanding E, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a conflict in another context that either the pupil or the teacher brings with them to the classroom; in either case, the other party becomes the target of this transferred conflict. The teachers express this view by saying that a new substitute conflict can emerge when, for instance, the teacher 'is stressed out about, for example, how the nursing home treats your old mum' (T10), or the pupils 'bring things with them' (T7) like 'unsafe conditions at home' (T14) and 'quarrels about alcoholism and drugs' (T7).

When taking the perspective of understanding E, one or more teachers in focus groups G2 and G6 express views that could be described in terms of two themes. The first (10) is trying to move the conflict back to where it actually belongs. Here, when it comes to the pupils, one or more teachers suggest strategies like establishing contact with parents, school counsellors or social services (G2, G6) or, when it comes to the teachers themselves, going into professional mode and dealing with the original conflict later (G6). The second theme (11) is trying to express and instil empathy and care and is directed at a situation where the pupil brings a conflict with them. In this case, one or more teachers suggest strategies like willingly responding and adapting to the specific pupil's needs (G2, G6) and asking the rest of the class to show special consideration (G6).

Understanding F – Strategy themes 12–14

In understanding F, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning them deviating from their role as a professional teacher and putting their personal needs at the forefront owing to (for instance) tiredness or stress. The teachers express this view by saying that a conflict might emerge owing to them, for example, being 'tired' (T13) or 'stressed' (T10) and this makes them 'react with less empathy' (T10), focus on their 'own needs' (T10) and 'reflect on things less through the pupils' points of view on the situation.' (T10).

When taking the perspective of understanding F, one or more teachers in focus groups G3 and G5 express views that could be described in terms of three themes. The first (12) concerns a declaration of the teacher as being a human, and one or more teachers suggesting strategies like saying how one feels and also sometimes why one feels that way (G3, G5), or apologizing to the class or pupils for having a short fuse at the moment (G5). The

second theme (13) describes an effort to take back the role of teacher, including strategies such as trying to be one's normal teacher-self (G3) or preparing the lesson in such a way that it is easier to keep the teacher role intact in front of the pupils (G5). The last theme (14) describes momentarily leaving the scene, with one or more teachers suggesting strategies like cancelling the lesson or handing it over to a colleague (G3).

Understanding G – Strategy theme 15

In understanding G, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a lack of relationship between teacher and pupil, caused by them not knowing each other well enough. The teachers express this view by referring, for example, to the need for creating relationships when meeting a new class: 'I feel that they have to know me and I have to get to know them and I need to get in contact with those who do this [disturb] … so we build a relationship' (T11), otherwise 'the boat is rocking' (T11) and there is a risk is of emerging conflicts constantly recurring.

When taking the perspective of understanding G, one or more teachers in focus groups G1 and G4 express a view that could be described in terms of a theme (15) aimed at building a relationship. This theme includes strategies such as working to create trust (G1, G4), finding and paying attention to positive characteristics in every pupil (G1), showing interest in the pupils' personal life (G4), and instilling in the pupils the idea that the teacher is on their side (G1, G4).

Understanding H – Strategy themes 16–19

In understanding H, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a verbal and/or non-verbal shortcoming in communication. The teachers express this view by referring to a conflict emerging owing to, for instance, 'lack of language' (T14) amongst the pupils hindering the teacher in 'managing the conflict' (T14) or the pupils 'being extremely angry' (T15) and the teacher having 'no possibility of communicating' (T15) with them in any way as long as they are upset.

When taking the perspective of understanding H, one or more teachers in focus groups G3 and G5 express views that could be described in terms of four different strategy themes. The first (16) concerns searching for alternative ways to communicate. In this theme, one or more teachers suggest strategies like using signs, body language, dolls and word-trays (G3, G5). The second theme (17) involves one-to-one conversations with a particular pupil, with one or more teachers suggesting strategies like interrupting the lesson to talk to the pupil (G5) or talking to the pupil after the end of the lesson (G3). The third theme (18) centres around changing the lesson plan. In this case, one or more teachers suggest strategies such as putting on a movie (G5). The fourth theme (19) concerns informing pupils about classroom structure. Here one or more teachers in the groups suggest strategies like explaining classroom conventions, creating predictability in lesson arrangements and clarifying the difference between lesson and break behaviour (G5).

Understanding I – Strategy themes 20–22

In understanding I, the individually interviewed teachers convey a view on emerging conflict as concerning a conflict of interest between teacher and pupil, that is, the teacher and the pupil want different things in a certain situation. The teachers express this view quite

straightforwardly by saying that a conflict might emerge because the teacher's 'interest and their [the pupils'] interests are different' (T14). The pupils are not 'interested in' (T4) what the teacher is trying to teach them: there are, so to say, at least, two different 'ideas of what's important' (T14) at that particular moment.

When taking the perspective of understanding I, one or more teachers in focus groups G2 and G6 express views that could be described in terms of three different themes. One (20) concerns planning to create interest, with one or more teachers suggesting strategies like preparing especially interesting lesson sequences or figuring out new and more entertaining ways to teach (G2, G6). Another theme (21) concerns involving students in the planning. One or more teachers here suggest strategies like giving pupils a chance to influence content and ways of working with the content (G6). The final theme (22) concerns giving the pupils positive reinforcement. In this case, one or more teachers suggest strategies like mentioning pupils' earlier achievements and using these achievements to motivate them (G2).

DISCUSSION

In connection to classroom management and conflict resolution research, the aim of our project was to give a (more) nuanced picture of the understanding–strategy link concerning emerging conflicts between primary school teachers and their pupils, from a teacher's point of view. By using a qualitatively driven mixed-method design with a sequential setup (Morse, 2003, 2009; Morse & Cheek, 2014, 2015; Morse & Niehaus, 2009), we were able to derive nine distinctively different ways in which primary school teachers understand emerging conflicts, and link each different way of understanding to between one and four different strategy themes. Altogether, 22 different strategy themes, containing a multitude of separate strategies, were recognized and linked to the nine different understandings. In other words, the teachers provided a nuanced and insightful overview of the different understandings and how they are linked to different coping strategies.

If we look at the results in isolation, the sheer diversity of understandings and strategy themes might be seen as an indication of a high degree of complexity surrounding the situations of emerging conflict that teachers meet in their everyday work. This elaborate pattern of understandings and strategy themes might also be seen as indicating that the teachers, at a collective level, have developed a broad repertoire of understandings and strategies to cope with these situations. This view is strengthened if we look further at the relational features of understandings and strategy themes, as there seems to be an overall consistency between each unique understanding and its linked strategy theme(s). For instance, regarding understanding B, an emerging conflict as a challenge to individualized boundaries, all strategy themes are centred around these individualized agreements. However, if we look in more detail into particular strategies (not themes) in relation to the understandings they are linked to, there are some possible inconsistencies to discuss. For example, it's possible to discuss whether teachers *trying new ways of organizing lessons*, a strategy suggested in relation to understanding D, is a reasonable strategy to adopt, as this understanding is based on an assumption that the conflict stems from the school's organization and to a large degree is beyond the control of teachers and pupils. On the other hand, such a strategy could also be seen as a last-resort strategy that the teachers have to adopt when nothing happens at municipal and school level. Indeed, the teachers need to try to make things work in the classroom. Altogether, the teachers, at a collective level, seems to have quite a refined toolbox of different understandings and thereby associated strategies on hand in relation to situations of emerging conflict. Even so, it is likely that tensions will appear between the different understandings and strategy themes, particularly in a real-life situation. For example, if a teacher is faced with a pupil leaving his/her seat and understands this as

a challenge to agenda (understanding A), the teacher is prone to respond immediately with strategies to keep them seated, as this understanding is based on an expectation that pupils are 'to sit down and listen'. This interpretation of the situation might indeed facilitate a focus on continuation of teaching and the view that the pupils in the class in general 'have a right to learn', but at the same time it could also hinder taking into consideration pupils with particular needs, such as the need to sometimes move around in the classroom without being reprimanded. If the same situation is instead understood as *a challenge to individualized boundaries* (understanding B), the teacher might allow the pupil to move about, as this understanding is based on individual needs, and respond with strategies that focus on individualized agreements (with particular pupils) about acceptable behaviour, rather than enforcing a sit-down policy. Adopting Understanding B in this situation can indeed be beneficial for the pupil with specific needs, but at the same time it might risk restricting the progress of the teaching for the class in favour of individual concerns. This kind of tension signals that the individual teachers must be extremely flexible and really think on their feet in handling these kinds of situations in their classrooms, dynamically testing and shifting between possible understandings, and thereby linked strategy themes, on the spur of the moment.

Let's now relate our results to the earlier research mentioned in the introduction (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Goyette et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007; Hughes et al., 1993; Koutrouba, 2013; Soodak & Podell, 1994). This research has mainly used quantitative methods with pre-selected categories when investigating the understanding–strategy link. There has been a suspicion that such an approach might cause some understandings and strategies to go unnoticed (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Little, 2005). Our results support this suspicion, as we with our qualitative methods were able to capture and showcase a broader spectrum of both understandings (9) and suggested strategies (22 themes) than the pre-designed category systems of the earlier studies. For example, the Hodges Kulinna (2007) study presented the teachers with only four understanding categories ('Out of School', 'Student', 'Teacher', 'School') to choose from for the whole spectrum of tense situations in the classroom. The Goyette et al. (2000) study gave five choices for the understanding component and limited strategy choices to two options when addressing the whole spectrum of tense situations. Even Bibou-Nakou et al. (2000), the only study we found that specifically targeted emerging conflict, gave limited opportunities to capture as wide a spectrum as our results suggest, with eight predesigned different understandings and eight predesigned strategies for teachers to choose from.

It is not only in terms of the number of understandings and strategies found that our results are more richly nuanced. In the earlier studies, the components of the understanding–strategy link are described in brief terms that convey little information. For instance, regarding the understanding component, the Goyette et al. (2000) study has categories as sparse as 'student teacher' and 'pupil's personal characteristics'. This stands in stark contrast to the more in-depth description of each of the different components in the understanding–strategy link that comes with the inductive qualitative design of our project.

We would also argue that framing these situations of minor tension as conflicts and talking about them as emerging conflicts add further nuance to the understanding–strategy link that would not otherwise be apparent. As stated in the introduction, the majority of previous studies approached the link from a classroom management perspective, implying that they view the link from the perspective of pupils' misbehaviours or disturbances (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Brophy & Rohrkemper, 1981; Goyette et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007; Hughes et al., 1993; Koutrouba, 2013; Soodak & Podell, 1994). Our results suggest that one might, at least in part, see other things when framing these situations as conflicts. For example, understanding E, *Emerging conflict as a substitute for another conflict*, points to a family component; this is one of the most common understandings named in the questionnaires and was often acknowledged by teachers in earlier studies as one of the main explanatory

factors behind tense situations in the classroom (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007; Koutrouba, 2013; Soodak & Podell, 1994). However, in earlier research, only the pupil's family was seen as relevant; in our results, both the pupils' and the teacher's family situations surface as possible origins of classroom conflict. Might this difference be due to the different framings? Of course, this cannot be stated with absolute certainty, but when tense situations in the classroom are framed as pupils' misbehaviours or disturbances, we propose, a focus on the pupil's family is more or less a foregone conclusion. The conflict framing does not so clearly label one of the parties in advance as the villain in the situation. Instead, it allows for democratic processes, giving space to different voices (Parker & Bickmore, 2020).

Another concern about earlier research is that the link between particular understandings and choices of strategy was not clearly established (Goyette et al., 2000; Hodges Kulinna, 2007; Hughes et al., 1993). The results from our project, on the contrary, strongly indicate such a link. The reason why this underlying connection appears so clearly in our project, we suggest, might be due to the project design. The teachers in the supplemental study were presented with nuanced descriptions of the nine understandings from the main study, and were asked to take the perspective of each of these understandings when suggesting strategies. These teachers also largely recognized and confirmed the nine understandings, suggesting a high level of pragmatic validity. This stands in contrast to past studies, which, using quantitative instruments with sparsely described choices, may have been too imprecise to capture the presence of the sought-after link, making the relationships between certain understandings and certain strategies obscure.

In sum, one can make two arguments based on the results of our project in relation to earlier research on the understanding–strategy link. First, one could argue for the wider use of the project's methods with regard to other types of tense situations in the classroom. It would provide additional opportunities to give more robust, complete and in-depth descriptions of the link concerning these types of situations. It might also open up space for additional nuance, by framing the situation as a conflict rather than in terms of the pupil's misbehaviours or disturbances, as the predominant research strand, classroom management research, has done. Secondly, if one wants to continue investigating the link from a quantitative vantage point, the project's results can give valuable information on how to develop better instruments: by widening the spectrum of options to choose from regarding both components of the link and giving more extensive descriptions of the components. Perhaps these alterations would serve to reveal the link more clearly when using a quantitative study design.

Although the results from the project reported are promising and encourage further use of the methods described, it is important to notice that the results have limitations. One such limitation is set by cultural context. The project was carried out in Sweden, and circumstances unique to Sweden could influence how teachers talk about the understanding–strategy link. Future, similar studies conducted in other countries may give clues as to how such contextual circumstance might influence how teachers talk about the link. Another limitation is that we do not know how the understandings and linked strategies that teachers talk about in our interviews manifest in the classroom in reality, or even if there is any visible effect in the classroom at all. Such research would provide valuable information about the practical implications of the understanding–strategy link. Often an ethnographic study design is regarded as effective for this purpose. One might also see a limitation in relation to questions concerning how pupils' gender, ethnicity and social background might influence the teachers' understandings and strategies. Although we have not been able to recognize such tendencies clearly in our data, we have not targeted these types of questions in particular, neither in the interviews nor in the analysis. Our focus has been to capture how teachers spontaneously understand and strategize about emerging conflicts. Further recognition of these types of questions would of course be appropriate when investigating the link in the future.

From a teacher and teacher-training perspective, the results of our project are indeed valuable. As discussed in the introduction, research shows that emerging conflicts are one of the major factors behind teacher job stress, teacher burnout and teachers leaving their profession (Bibou-Nakou et al., 1999; Manning & Butcher, 2005; Petoda, 2007). More accurate knowledge about how teachers understand and strategize about conflicts is a prerequisite for addressing these problems and taking appropriate actions to minimize them. The results also give voice to teachers and take their deep experiential knowledge seriously. This is important, as we would argue that teachers are professionals whose specialized knowledge cannot be acquired anywhere other than the classroom. Even though many teachers as individuals may seem perplexed and stressed over these tense situations and how to handle them, teachers' collective knowledge on this topic should not be ignored or underestimated. It might even be conceivable to put this collective knowledge in the centre of efforts to develop suitable teacher-training programmes on how to address emerging conflict. We suggest that making student teachers aware that they themselves can be the source of the emerging conflict (understandings E and F) and that there are strategies to handle emerging conflict from these points of views, as well as that there could be forces beyond their control that have to be taken into account when assessing the emerging conflict situation (understanding D), etc., has the potential to allow these student teachers to recognize the complexity of emerging conflicts. Most importantly, doing this would give student teachers access to valuable tools to handle these situations from a variety of different vantage points. In a training effort of this kind, it would, of course, also be advisable to highlight the possible pros and cons of certain understandings and their associated strategies, as discussed earlier. A teacher-training programme based on these premises would, we think, offer the promise of equipping student teachers with professionally acquired tools to enable them to think on their feet when facing situations of emerging conflict in classroom life.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT
The research reported in this article adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT
Not applicable.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES
Not applicable.

CLINICAL TRIAL REGISTRATION
Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data available on request from the authors.

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ENDNOTE
[1] The results from the main study have been published previously (Hakvoort, 2020).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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