

Leadership and Conflicts in Serbian Primary Schools

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~ The present study investigates how transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and leader–member exchange relate to task, relationship and process conflicts in Serbian primary schools, and examines whether organisational commitment and power distance moderate these relationships. Survey data were collected from 380 teachers. The results show that most leadership dimensions reduce conflict: core transformational leadership lowers task conflict, whereas leader–member exchange most strongly decreases relationship and process conflict. Contingent punishment behaviour, however, increases conflict, and supportive leadership may raise relationship conflict in certain contexts. Moderation analyses reveal that high organisational commitment and low power distance strengthen the conflict-reducing effects of leadership. Organisational commitment enhances effects on task and process conflict, while low power distance strengthens effects on relationship conflict. These findings highlight the interplay of leadership style and organisational context in understanding conflict dynamics in schools and offer practical guidance for fostering healthy interpersonal and work environments.

Keywords: leadership, leader–member exchange, conflict, teachers, primary schools, Serbia

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Vodenje in konflikti v srbskih osnovnih šolah

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~ Ta študija preučuje, kako so transformacijsko, transakcijsko in etično vodenje ter izmenjava med vodjo in člani povezani s konflikti ki se pojavljajo v povezavi z nalogami, odnosi in s postopki v srbskih osnovnih šolah, ter preučuje, ali organizacijska zavezanost in razdalja moči ublažita te povezave. Podatki ankete so bili zbrani pri 380 učiteljih. Izsledki kažejo, da večina dimenzij vodenja zmanjšuje konflikte: osnovno transformacijsko vodenje zmanjšuje konflikte, povezane z nalogami, medtem ko izmenjava med vodjo in člani najmočnejše zmanjšuje konflikte, povezane z odnosi in s postopki. Pogojno kaznovalno vedenje po drugi strani povečuje konflikte, podporno vodenje pa lahko v določenih kontekstih poveča konflikte, povezane z odnosi. Analize moderacije kažejo, da visoka organizacijska zavezanost in nizka razdalja moči okrepi ta učinke vodenja, ki zmanjšujejo konflikte. Organizacijska zavezanost okrepi učinke na konflikte, povezane z nalogami in s postopki, medtem ko nizka razdalja moči okrepi učinke na konflikte v odnosih. Ti izsledki poudarjajo medsebojno delovanje pristopa vodenja in organizacijskega konteksta pri razumevanju dinamike konfliktov v šolah ter ponujajo praktična navodila za spodbujanje zdravega medosebnega in delovnega okolja.

Ključne besede: vodenje, izmenjava med vodjo in člani, konflikt, učitelji, osnovne šole, Srbija

Introduction

Conflict is commonly defined as a process in which one party perceives its interests to be opposed or negatively affected by another (Wall & Callister, 1995). Traditional perspectives framed conflict as inherently harmful, whereas contemporary approaches view it as an inevitable organisational phenomenon with both functional and dysfunctional potential (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002). The most widely used conceptualisation identifies three types of conflict: task, relationship and process conflict (Robbins & Judge, 2009). These constructs form the foundation of the present study.

Schools, like other organisations, frequently experience conflicts that may hinder performance and the achievement of educational goals (Tusianah et al., 2023; Uzun & Ayik, 2017). Effective leadership is therefore essential for maintaining a constructive organisational climate, managing conflicts and supporting school effectiveness (Fullan, 2007; Kadir & Geleta, 2017). Primary schools are characterised by increasingly complex interpersonal dynamics. Leadership behaviours therefore directly shape the quality of leader–member exchange (LMX) and consequently the way conflicts are resolved (Gholap, 2026). According to Maral and Hamedoğlu (2021), empirical research on how leadership styles predict conflict management in educational settings remains scarce, which highlights the urgent need to validate these theoretical relationships.

Research underscores the importance of leadership style for school climate and organisational functioning. Transformational leadership has been linked to positive outcomes in preschools (Mlinarević et al., 2022), universities (Tahiraj, 2022) and schools more broadly. The ability of leaders to communicate, build trust and manage interpersonal relations shapes their effectiveness in conflict management (Johnson, 2003). Conflict sources often stem from institutional, interpersonal and leadership factors, and principals therefore require strong managerial and relational competencies (Anderson, 2017).

Empirical findings across contexts highlight that transformational leadership predicts improved organisational performance, teacher satisfaction and reduced conflict (Anderson, 2017; Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020). LMX has similarly been associated with lower conflict levels in work teams, as high-quality leader–follower relationships promote trust, support and cooperation (Zhou & Shi, 2014). Ethical leadership, emphasising fairness, integrity and responsible influence, has also been linked to improved employee attitudes and trust as well as overall organisational functioning (Brown et al., 2005; Babalola et al., 2016).

Despite the extensive evidence on leadership outcomes, few studies have examined how specific leadership dimensions – particularly ethical leadership

and LMX – relate to conflict in school settings. The present study therefore investigates how transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX predict task, relationship and process conflicts in Serbian primary schools. Additionally, it examines whether organisational commitment and power distance moderate these relationships. The findings aim to advance the understanding of leadership–conflict dynamics and offer practical suggestions for conflict prevention and school management. A number of references state the need to examine the effect of the examined moderating variables on the relationship between leadership and conflicts (Abdullah et al., 2025; Gholap, 2026; Vinokur et al., 2024) as well as on leadership and other organisational outcomes (Łucjan et al., 2023; Yue, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Transformational and Transactional Leadership

Burns (1978) distinguished transactional and transformational leadership as two contrasting approaches. Transactional leadership emphasises task accomplishment through rewards and sanctions (Northouse, 2008), while transformational leadership inspires followers by articulating a vision, encouraging innovation and addressing individual needs (Burns, 1978).

In education, transformational leadership has been linked to improved reform implementation, teacher motivation and school performance (Anderson, 2017). Studies from Greece show that both transformational and transactional leadership contribute to effective conflict management, with principals often relying on compromise strategies (Saiti, 2014; Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020). Other work highlights the cognitive and relational components of transformational leadership, such as empathy and perspective-taking, which shape leadership effectiveness (Da'as, 2020). By employing restorative and participatory techniques, transformational leaders can further minimise conflict intensity by cultivating an environment of mutual trust and open communication (Anjani et al., 2025; Wardani et al., 2024). Conversely, transactional leadership functions through established protocols and clear reward systems, facilitating the prompt resolution of conflicts rooted in performance gaps or rule non-compliance (Annet, 2025).

Findings from other contexts are more mixed. In Indonesia, for example, transformational leadership has shown limited effects on conflict management, with servant leadership appearing more effective (Tusianah et al., 2023). Nevertheless, research across educational settings emphasises leadership as a key determinant of organisational culture, climate and conflict dynamics (Mlinarević

et al., 2022; Tahiraj, 2022).

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership has gained prominence as organisations recognise the importance of fairness, responsibility and integrity in shaping employee behaviour. Leaders influence not only organisational outcomes but also the ethical climate, as their behaviour models acceptable conduct for followers (Nort-house, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2009).

Research shows that ethical leadership fosters employee confidence, acceptance of change and reduced turnover intention (Babalola et al., 2016). Through social learning mechanisms, ethical leaders act as role models whose fairness, transparency and concern for followers shape organisational norms and behaviour (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leadership has been positively associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and a constructive relational climate.

Ethical leadership serves as a foundational element in cultivating professional conduct and establishing harmonious academic environments, effectively mitigating interpersonal friction among staff (Jingting, 2025). Ethical leaders empower educators to navigate workplace disputes more adeptly, transforming potential tension into opportunities for institutional growth (Babalola et al., 2016; Hussin et al., 2025).

LMX

LMX theory conceptualises leadership as a relational process, focusing on the quality of dyadic relationships between leaders and followers (Nort-house, 2008). Low-quality LMX or LMX differentiation has been associated with higher relationship conflict, as unequal treatment fuels resentment and tension among team members (Zhou & Shi, 2014). High-quality LMX reduces interpersonal conflict, where relational dynamics are central to organisational functioning (Chernyak-Hai & Tziner, 2014). The quality of LMX facilitates transparent communication channels that allow school leaders to address underlying organisational stressors before they manifest as destructive conflicts (Abdullah et al., 2025; Annet, 2025).

Research Problem, Hypotheses and Research Questions

Although the existing literature highlights the positive effects of leadership on organisational outcomes, research linking specific leadership dimensions – especially ethical leadership and LMX – to various types of conflict in schools remains limited. The present study therefore examines how

transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX predict task, relationship and process conflict in Serbian primary schools.

Based on the theoretical review, two hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: There is a statistically significant association between transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions, on the one hand, and the dimensions of conflict in Serbian primary schools, on the other.
- H2: Transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions significantly predict the dimensions of conflict in Serbian primary schools.

Two research questions address potential moderators:

- RQ1: Does organisational commitment moderate the relationship between transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions, on the one hand, and the dimensions of conflict in Serbian primary schools, on the other?
- RQ2: Does power distance moderate the relationships between transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions, on the one hand, and the dimensions of conflict in Serbian primary schools, on the other?

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study was conducted in Serbian primary schools during the 2023/2024 academic year. Teachers completed paper-based or online questionnaires. Of the 397 collected responses, 380 were retained after excluding incomplete surveys. The sample consisted of 74 men (19.5%) and 306 women (80.5%), reflecting typical gender distributions in Serbian primary education.

For moderation analyses, the respondents were divided by median splits:

- Organisational commitment: low (< 4.00 ; $n = 189$) and high (≥ 4.00 ; $n = 191$)
- Power distance: low (≤ 4.00 ; $n = 208$) and high (> 4.00 ; $n = 172$)

Instruments

Validated instruments were used to measure leadership behaviours, conflict dimensions, organisational commitment and power distance:

- Transformational leadership: Transformational Leadership Behavior Inventory (Podsakoff et al., 1990; MacKenzie et al., 2001), including core

leader behaviour, high performance expectations, supportive behaviour and intellectual stimulation.

- Transactional leadership: seven-item scale assessing contingent reward and contingent punishment behaviours (Podsakoff et al., 1984; MacKenzie et al., 2001).
- Ethical leadership: Ethical Leadership Scale (Brown et al., 2005).
- LMX: LMX-7 scale assessing trust, respect and mutual obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).
- Conflict: task, relationship and process conflict measured via the Extended Intragroup Conflict Scale (Jehn et al., 2008).
- Organisational commitment: nine-item scale assessing identification, involvement and loyalty (Cook & Wall, 1980).
- Power distance: adapted GLOBE measure, “as-is” version (House et al., 2002).

Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design based on self-report questionnaires. Data were collected at a single point in time to examine the relationships between leadership styles, LMX and conflict.

The research design included the following steps:

1. Selection of participating schools. The research included 84 schools, half of which were chosen on the basis of the authors of the paper knowing the principals and/or some of the teachers employed in the schools. Approximately half of the received questionnaires were collected in these schools, while the rest were collected by sending the questionnaire via Google Forms to the contact addresses of a larger number of primary schools in Serbia.
2. Administration of the questionnaire. The teachers completed the questionnaire either in printed form during staff meetings or electronically. The administration procedure ensured anonymity and confidentiality, following ethical research standards.
3. Data screening and preparation. The completed questionnaires were screened for missing responses, resulting in a final sample of 380 teachers.
4. Statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses and research questions.

Results

Characteristics of Leadership, LMX and Conflict Variables

The results of descriptive statistics for the transformational, transactional and ethical leadership, LMX, conflicts, organisational commitment and power distance dimensions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Leadership, Conflict, Organisational Commitment and Power Distance Variables

Variable	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Core transformational leader behaviour (CTL)	380	1.0	7.0	5.1	1.7	.96
High performance expectations (HPE)	380	1.0	7.0	4.7	1.4	.82
Supportive leader behaviour (SLB)	380	1.0	7.0	5.0	1.8	.98
Intellectual stimulation (IST)	380	1.0	7.0	4.6	1.7	.97
Contingent reward behaviour (CRB)	380	1.0	7.0	4.8	1.8	.95
Contingent punishment behaviour (CPB)	380	1.0	7.0	4.2	1.5	.90
Ethical leadership behaviour (ELB)	380	1.0	7.0	5.3	1.7	.98
Leader-member exchange (LMX)	380	1.0	7.0	5.0	1.6	.96
Task conflict (CT)	380	1.0	5.0	2.2	0.9	.91
Relationship conflict (CR)	380	1.0	5.0	1.8	0.8	.79
Process conflict (CP)	380	1.0	5.0	2.2	1.0	.94
Overall conflict (C)	380	1.0	5.0	2.1	0.8	.95
Organisational commitment (OCM)	380	1.4	5.0	3.9	0.8	.87
Power distance (PD)	380	1.0	7.0	4.0	1.3	.73

Note. *N* = number of respondents; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Associations Between Leadership, LMX and Conflict

Coefficients of correlation between the transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions, on the one hand, and conflicts dimensions in Serbian primary schools, on the other, are given in Table 2. Pearson's correlation was used.

Table 2*Correlations Between Leadership Dimensions, LMX and Conflict Variables*

	CT	CR	CP	C
CTL	- 0.22**	- 0.13*	- 0.24**	- 0.22**
HPE	- 0.05	0.01	- 0.06	- 0.04
SLB	- 0.18**	- 0.08	- 0.19**	- 0.17**
IST	- 0.17**	- 0.08	- 0.21**	- 0.18**
CRB	- 0.15**	- 0.06	- 0.17**	- 0.15**
CPB	0.05	0.11*	0.08	0.08
ELB	- 0.21**	- 0.14**	- 0.25*	- 0.22**
LMX	- 0.21**	- 0.14**	- 0.25*	- 0.23**

Note.* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Predictors of Conflict Dimensions

The predictive effect of the transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions (independent variables) on the conflicts dimensions (dependent variables) was examined using multiple regression analysis (Table 3).

Table 3*Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Conflict Dimensions*

Depen- dent	Independent								R^2	F	Sig.
	CTL	HPE	SLB	IST	CRB	CPB	ELB	LMX			
	β										
CT	- 0.27	0.09	0.07	- 0.05	0.14	0.08	0.01	- 0.16	0.07	3.54	0.001
CR	- 0.15	0.07	0.21	- 0.01	0.17	0.13	- 0.16	- 0.24	0.06	3.07	0.002
CP	- 0.18	0.08	0.17	- 0.13	0.16	0.13	- 0.08	- 0.26	0.10	5.18	0.000
C	- 0.24	0.09	0.15	- 0.07	0.17	0.12	- 0.06	- 0.25	0.09	4.60	0.000

The Moderating Role of Organisational Commitment

The results of the correlation analysis between the transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions, on the one hand, and conflicts dimensions (specifically for low and high organisational commitment), on the other, are given in Table 4. The examination of the moderating effect of organisational commitment was carried out using hierarchical regression analysis.

Table 4

Correlations Between Leadership Dimensions, LMX and Conflict Dimensions by Level of Organisational Commitment

Organisational commitment		CT	CR	CP	C
Low organisational commitment <i>n</i> = 189	CTL	-.11	-.09	-.11	-.12
	HPE	-.01	0.05	0.01	0.01
	SLB	-.02	-0.09	-0.03	-0.02
	IST	-.05	-0.02	-0.09	-0.06
	CRB	.00	0.02	-0.01	0
	CPB	.01	0.13	0.03	0.05
	ELB	-.10	-.01	-0.12	-0.12
	LMX	-.80	-0.09	-0.09	-0.09
High organisational commitment <i>n</i> = 191	CTL	-.21**	-.15*	-.23**	-.22**
	HPE	.01	0.01	0	0.01
	SLB	-.24**	-0.13	-.24**	-.23**
	IST	-.16*	-0.11	-.18*	-.16*
	CRB	-.18*	-0.09	-.19**	-.17*
	CPB	.12	0.11	.18*	.15*
	ELB	-.20**	-.16*	-.24**	-.22**
	LMX	-.22**	-.17*	-.26**	-.24**

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

The Moderating Role of Power Distance

The results of the correlation analysis between the transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions, on the one hand, and conflicts dimensions (specifically for low and high power distance), on the other, are given in Table 5. The examination of the moderating effect of power distance was carried out using hierarchical regression analysis.

Table 5

Correlations Between Leadership Dimensions, LMX, and Conflict Dimensions by Level of Power Distance

Power distance		CT	CR	CP	C
Low power distance <i>n</i> = 208	CTL	-.27**	-.27**	-.32**	-.32**
	HPE	-.08	-.15*	-0.09	-0.11
	SLB	-.24**	-.18**	-.29**	-.28**
	IST	-.25**	-.26**	-.32**	-.31**
	CRB	-.22**	-.19**	-.29**	-.27**
	CPB	-.01	-0.09	.057	-0.01
	ELB	-.28**	-.28**	-.36**	-.34**
	LMX	-.28**	-.28**	-.35**	-.34**
High power distance <i>n</i> = 172	CTL	-.15*	0.01	-0.15	-0.12
	HPE	-.06	0.11	-0.05	-0.01
	SLB	-.09	0.03	-0.09	-0.07
	IST	-.09	0.09	-0.09	-0.05
	CRB	-.06	0.07	-0.04	-0.02
	CPB	.08	.24**	0.09	0.13
	ELB	-.12	0	-0.12	-0.1
	LMX	-.12	0	-0.14	-0.1

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

Relationships Between Leadership Dimensions and Conflicts (H1)

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the majority of the correlations are statistically significant. This suggests that transformational, transactional and ethical leadership, as well as LMX dimensions, have a significant influence on conflict dimensions in Serbian primary schools. Accordingly, hypothesis H1 is supported.

It is clear that the correlations are negative in most cases. This means that the observed independent variables reduce conflicts, that is, they have a favourable effect. In this regard, the influence of the LMX dimension stands out. Among other things, this construct simultaneously includes feedback, understanding and help from the principal, as well as trust in the principal's decisions and good working relations with the principal. It is logical that high values of LMX have a strong potential for reducing conflicts, as existing research

consistently finds that high-quality LMX in schools: helps communication, reduces stress and conflicts (Abdullah et al., 2025; Annet, 2025); reduces teacher burnout, high turnover rates and systemic tensions (Vinokur et al., 2024); and makes teachers feel valued and safe, thus reducing the occurrence of interpersonal friction (Aquino & Alvarez, 2023).

The positive influences of the ethical leadership behaviour and core transformational leader behaviour dimensions are also highlighted in the study. In addition to the ethical behaviour of leaders in all situations at work and outside of work, ethical leadership behaviour also includes making fair decisions, the integrity of the principal, and the readiness of the principal to listen to employees and act in their interest. Such an approach focusing on ethics and employees certainly reduces conflicts in school. This finding is consistent previous studies. According to Jingting (2025), ethical leadership is an important factor of a harmonious academic environment, effectively alleviating interpersonal friction. Ethical leaders encourage teachers to manage workplace disputes more skilfully (Babalola et al., 2016; Hussin et al., 2025) and create a climate that reduces destructive disputes (Sari & Lestari, 2025).

Core transformational leader behaviour implies that the principal has a clear vision, provides an appropriate model for achieving goals, and motivates employees to accept and achieve goals. The emphasised presence of such leadership qualities indicates that the school is in harmony with the environment, that it is moving in the right direction, and that the path is clear for everyone, all of which gives employees confidence in the long-term successful operation of the school, thus reducing the reasons for the existence of conflicts. This result is consistent with the finding that the transformational behaviours of leaders often foster the trust necessary to mitigate conflict (Aravidou et al., 2025). The finding of the present study is consistent with numerous previous studies that have found that transformational leadership: helps in resolving conflicts in schools (Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020); minimises the intensity of conflict by nurturing an environment of mutual trust and open communication (Anjani et al., 2025; Wardani et al., 2024); and reduces conflict by fostering respect and de-escalating potential power struggles (Maral & Hamedoğlu, 2021). In contrast, Tusianah et al. (2023) determined that transformational leadership should not be the first choice in conflict resolution.

Conflicts can be reduced to a lesser extent by the action of the intellectual stimulation, supportive leader behaviour and contingent reward behaviour dimensions, as can be expected. It should be noted that transactional leadership can reduce conflicts in the part of reward behaviour. Some previous studies therefore suggest that it is desirable to combine transformational

and transactional style, whereby the transactional part contributes to achieving greater responsibility and operational stability (Anwar et al., 2024), strengthening discipline and professional standards (Rosiana & Nugraha, 2026), as well as using established protocols of achieved performance (Parcon & Pedroso, 2025).

The high performance expectations dimension has the least impact. Insisting on giving the maximum and achieving the best results obviously creates discomfort among employees, putting them in a state of pressure, which is not a very favourable basis for reducing conflicts. It is, however, positive that there is no increase in conflicts in such circumstances. Finally, there is one dimension that can statistically significantly increase relationship conflict, namely, contingent punishment behaviour. If the principal clearly expresses dissatisfaction about results failing to achieve the expected level, followed by some form of punishment, there may be disruptions in the relations between individual employees. Some employees may feel oppressed and start to believe that others are (undeservedly) privileged, thus setting the stage for the development of conflict between colleagues.

Among the dependent variables, the process conflict dimension is most strongly affected. This suggests that leadership dimensions particularly influence work processes, the allocation of responsibilities and the execution of tasks. This finding aligns with the nature of schools as workplaces in which efficient, timely and effective work processes are essential. In contrast, task conflict and especially relationship conflict are less strongly influenced by the independent variables. These dimensions are more personal and less organisational in nature (especially relationship conflict); consequently, such conflicts are less affected by leadership components and more influenced by components of a personal nature, which shape relationships between individuals.

Predictive Effects of Leadership Dimensions on Conflicts (H2)

As shown in Table 3, among the leadership dimensions, LMX exhibits the strongest statistically significant negative effect, followed by core transformational leader behaviour, which aligns closely with the correlation analysis results. In the regression analysis, however, ethical leadership behaviour did not demonstrate a statistically significant predictive effect, probably due to the simultaneous influence of multiple independent variables. The explanation could be that ethical leadership behaviour refers more to some general, abstract aspects of the principal's behaviour, as well as to the characteristics of the principal's personality, while LMX directly describes the relationship between principals and employees, and thus concretely and directly affects conflicts in the organisation.

The contingent punishment behaviour dimension maintains a positive effect on relationship conflict, which is consistent with the correlation analysis results. Additionally, contingent punishment behaviour also has a positive influence on process conflict, as well as on the higher-order construct of overall conflict. It is obvious that the transactional style of leadership in the part of punishment behaviour also causes conflicts regarding the distribution and implementation of duties and tasks. It is very likely that employees have a certain fear that they are overburdened and will not meet expectations, resulting in being uncomfortably subjected to the displeasure of the principal and possible punishments. This gives rise to the potential for conflicts in the sphere of delegation of work and the process of carrying out work tasks.

The regression analysis reveals an interesting and perhaps unexpected finding: supportive leader behaviour exhibits a statistically significant positive predictive effect on relationship conflict. According to Table 2, the correlation between these two dimensions is not statistically significant, so this phenomenon may be a surprise, but it is not completely contrary to the previous (correlation) analysis. This result is quite complex and may have several explanations. First, if the respondent rated the principal's support and understanding as high, it is possible that this causes jealousy and perhaps contempt among other colleagues, resulting in the respondent having bad relations with the rest of the team: strong support leads to an increase in relationship conflict. On the other hand, if the respondent feels weak support and understanding from the principal, he or she can focus on good relations with other colleagues: weak support leads to a reduction in relationship conflict. Second, it may happen that some employees, convinced of the principal's understanding and support, become relaxed and arrogant in their relations with colleagues; thus, greater support again leads to more emphasised conflicts. Third, sincere trust and understanding of the principal easily creates high standards and expectations regarding all of the other relationships in the organisation, but since it is difficult to achieve that level of relationship with colleagues, everything seems bad and inadequate. Fourth, in the conditions of a high level of support from the leader, any dissatisfaction that may emerge cannot be directed at the principal and is consequently transferred to colleagues. Conversely, a low level of leader support can strengthen the common front of employees in relation to the leader and reduce conflicts between colleagues.

As shown in Table 3, the corrected determination indices (R^2) range from 0.062 to 0.101. While these values are relatively low, they are all statistically significant, thus supporting hypothesis H2. Among the conflict dimensions, the strongest predictive effect is observed for process conflict, followed

by task conflict, with the weakest effect for relationship conflict. These findings are fully consistent with the results of the correlation analysis.

*The Role of Organisational Commitment in Shaping Leadership–
Conflict Relations (RQ1)*

Hierarchical regression analysis examining the moderating role of teachers' organisational commitment revealed numerous relationships where this effect is statistically significant. This indicates that organisational commitment plays a meaningful moderating role, thus providing an answer to RQ1. Specifically, the moderating effect is most pronounced under conditions of high commitment: leadership dimensions are more effective in reducing conflict when employees are highly committed than when their commitment is low.

Strongly committed employees value a principal who applies desirable leadership approaches and behaviours, such as a clear vision, an idea of how to achieve the vision, motivating employees, ethical behaviour, support, understanding, good relations with employees and recognition of employee results. The combination of a leader who applies these principles and highly committed employees can result in a significant reduction in conflicts. In contrast, employees with low commitment tend to be less interested and engaged, so leadership style holds little significance for them, resulting in the leadership dimensions failing to have a statistically significant impact on conflicts.

The only axis in which the above findings do not hold is the relationship between the high performance expectations and contingent punishment behaviour dimensions, which showed the least impact on conflicts in the correlation analysis for the entire sample (Table 2). These dimensions simply do not have the potential to reduce conflicts, regardless of the degree of commitment of the employees. In highly committed employees, however, there is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the dimensions contingent punishment behaviour and process conflict. It is obvious that this group of teachers is particularly bothered by the principal's use of punishment and displays of displeasure, as they feel (probably rightly) that they do not deserve such behaviour. This leads to conflicts in the sphere of distribution of work duties and the manner of their execution.

It is important to note that the moderating effects refer to the dependent variables task conflict, process conflict and overall conflict, while there is no moderating effect on the dimension relationship conflict. Organisational commitment is a construct that relates to the individual but is directed at the organisation as a whole. The degree of organisational commitment therefore has the potential to affect conflicts related to work, while relationship conflicts are more influenced by constructs with a more emphasised personal component.

The Influence of Power Distance on Leadership–Conflict Relations (RQ2)

Hierarchical regression analysis examining the moderating role of power distance revealed several relationships in which the effect is statistically significant. Overall, the moderating influence of power distance on the observed relationships appears to be moderate, thus providing an answer to RQ2.

The moderating effect is reflected in stronger, statistically significant and negative correlations under conditions of low power distance. Low power distance is a reliable indicator of favourable characteristics of the leadership style in the organisation, which significantly reduces conflicts. Leadership therefore realises its full effect in reducing conflicts in the presence of low power distance. This is true for the vast majority of relationships in Table 5, except that the moderating effect is not shown as statistically significant for some relationships. Nevertheless, there is a clear tendency of the results in that direction.

As expected, the dimension contingent punishment behaviour has the opposite effect: an environment in which there is high power distance leads to transactional leader punishment behaviour strongly enhancing relationship conflict. The combination of high power distance and contingent punishment behaviour can easily create situations in which employees are punished simply because they are not close to the principal or they oppose him or her. In such circumstances, the organisational environment becomes extremely complex and stressful, which inevitably affects relations between employees, resulting in conflict situations, among other things.

It is precisely the statistically significant moderating effects of power distance that are mostly related to the relationship conflict dimension. As previously stated, organisational commitment is a construct that is linked to the individual but acts on the organisational level, and therefore also on conflicts related to tasks and processes. Conversely, power distance is a construct that refers to the organisational level but directly affects the individual and shapes relationships and conflicts between individuals.

Conclusion

In most cases, the transformational, transactional and ethical leadership and LMX dimensions work by reducing all aspects of conflicts in schools. In this regard, the influences of LMX and core transformational leader behaviour stand out. It is therefore important for employees that the principal (leader) has a clear vision and knows how to achieve it, but also that he or she has a positive approach and attitude towards employees. These are the key conditions that

keep the organisation in a state of minimal conflict. The effects of the LMX and core transformational leader behaviour dimensions stand out as the strongest, which follows from the very essence of these dimensions, as well as from the structure and content of the items that make them up, as explained in detail in the discussion. These dimensions and their items have a pronounced potential to contribute to the reduction of conflicts in schools. Moreover, core transformational leader behaviour especially reduces task conflict, while LMX particularly reduces relationship conflict and process conflict, which is in accordance with the nature of these independent variables.

Other dimensions of leadership reduce conflicts to a greater or lesser extent, with the exception of contingent punishment behaviour, which has the power to increase relationship conflict and process conflict. It should be noted that under certain conditions, supportive leader behaviour can also lead to an increase in relationship conflict. Leaders must therefore be attentive to the way they support employees (support should be balanced towards all subordinates) and monitor how their support is understood and accepted by the collective.

The moderators demonstrated significant and noteworthy effects, confirming that their selection was appropriate. Under conditions of high organisational commitment and low power distance, leadership dimensions substantially reduce conflict dimensions. In other words, the positive impact of leadership on conflicts is strongest in organisations where employees are highly committed and power distance is low. Additionally, organisational commitment primarily operates at the organisational level, enhancing the effects of leadership on task and process conflicts. In contrast, power distance exerts a stronger influence at the individual level, amplifying the impact of leadership on relationship conflict.

It is important to point out that the contingent punishment behaviour dimension increases process conflict in conditions when employees have high organisational commitment, while it increases relationship conflict when there is high power distance in the school. With the opposite effects (increasing conflicts), organisational commitment is related to the effects of leadership on process conflict, while power distance is related to the effects of leadership on relationship conflict.

Based on the results of the research, it is clear that school principals should be attentive to their leadership style. If they want to reduce conflicts, they should especially take care to clearly present their ideas and visions, to offer models for their realisation, and to inspire employees on the way to realisation. Moreover, it is very important to cultivate good relations with subordinates, whereby understanding and support towards employees should be

equally aimed at everyone. If there is a high expectation of performance, consideration must be given to how such an approach might affect employees. The expectation of high performance should be accompanied by an explanation of why it is important, as well as by strengthening the motivation of employees. It is certainly important to avoid transactional leader punishment behaviour, just as it is important to strive to reduce power distance and encourage teachers' organisational commitment. The findings of the present study clearly demonstrate that the role of principals in resolving conflicts in schools is extremely important, which is in accordance with previous research emphasising the importance of the role of principals for the successful functioning of school organisations in a general sense (Fullan, 2007).

One limitation of the present research is that the results and suggestions refer to primary schools in Serbia. However, it can be expected that similar relations exist in different organisational systems and in other countries, especially those with similar economic and cultural conditions. The theoretical importance of the work is that it provides an additional and detailed review of the effects of individual leadership dimensions on the specific conflicts dimensions. This is very important for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of connection between the observed variables, especially considering that there is not enough research that directly and concretely examines the relationships analysed here. The introduction of observed moderators proved to be justified and produced several significant results. In certain segments, the findings of the present research agree with those of previous research (the beneficial effects of LMX and core transformational leader behaviour on conflicts), but there are many individual relationships as well as some specific effects that existing studies have not identified (the variable effects of ethical leadership behaviour on conflicts; the variable effects of supportive leader behaviour on relationship conflict; the weak effects of high performance expectations on conflicts; the finding that contingent punishment behaviour increases process conflict and especially relationship conflict; the mode of action of the selected moderators on the observed relationships). The practical importance of the work stems from the defined recommendations for principals in primary schools based on the results of the research.

The findings of the present study offer several important directions for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to investigate how leadership behaviours and conflict dynamics evolve over time, as the cross-sectional design of the present study limits causal inferences. Moreover, qualitative approaches, including interviews or focus groups, may provide deeper insight into how employees interpret leadership behaviours and how these interpretations shape conflict experiences in various organisational contexts.

Ethical Statement

The research study was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the Technical Faculty “Mihajlo Pupin”, Zrenjanin, Serbia.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during the current study are not publicly available, as public release could compromise future publications or analyses, but they are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

The authors have not used any AI-assisted technologies in the writing of the paper and accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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