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SUMMARY OF THE Ph.D. THESIS

STRATEGIC EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT:

IMPLICATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS IN THE

ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORY

Introduction, research questions and relevance

This Ph.D. thesis addresses essential aspects of strategic educational management and its implications for key stakeholders in Romanian schools, including principals, teachers, and parents. The work is grounded in empirical evidence derived from four multi-source and multi-method studies, which explore complex relationships between diverse variables and actors within Romania's school ecosystem. In doing so, the thesis offers a broader and more nuanced understanding of how school principals, strategic educational directions, leadership styles, and conflict management approaches impact teachers and parents.

While strategic educational management encompasses many facets worth exploring, this thesis focuses on three core dimensions: strategic vision and planning, leadership practices, and conflict management in educational settings. The central research problem originates from the manner in which educational strategies are developed and implemented in schools. Despite the frequent use of student outcomes as indicators of strategic effectiveness, the literature remains unclear about who designs these strategies, how they are implemented, and the interrelations among these processes and people. Moreover, current research approaches are predominantly quantitative, lacking qualitative depth that could uncover the nuances of these organizational phenomena. Beyond strategy design, the school principal typically assumes responsibility for articulating, monitoring, and adapting strategic directions, while teachers are those who implement these strategies in practice. We know very little about the individual impact each of these actors



has on the strategic process of Romanian schools, and even less about how these roles influence broader organizational levels such as school climate, parent engagement, or student outcomes.

In the first article of this thesis, we address this research problem using a multi-source and multi-method approach by investigating the relationship between principals' cognitive-strategic complexity (CSC) and school-level implications as perceived by parents, mediated by teachers' organizational identification. Using a nonlinear mediation procedure, we demonstrate that CSC exhibits an inverted U-shaped relationship with teachers' identification with the school, which is in turn positively associated with parental involvement in school life and the academic climate as perceived by parents.

Next, the focus shifts to leadership and how is enacted in Romanian schools. A review of the literature reveals conceptual, theoretical, and even methodological ambiguities regarding distributed leadership, a construct increasingly adopted and studied in educational settings (Mifsud, 2023). These ambiguities have led to mixed outcomes in practice, prompting critical questions: To what extent is distributed leadership truly beneficial in the Romanian educational context? Can findings from other cultural contexts, including meta-analytical evidence, be replicated? Additionally, we identify significant methodological limitations that cast doubt on the construct and ecological validity of the instruments used to measure distributed leadership (Liu & Werblow, 2019; Tian, Risku & Collin, 2016).

Accordingly, we conducted two empirical studies examining distributed leadership, too often praised for its potential to enhance teacher performance and student achievement, despite existing theoretical confusion and methodological ambiguity. The second study in this thesis



includes a multilevel mediation analysis, highlighting a negative association between distributed leadership and both teacher empowerment and organizational identification. Furthermore, we show how teachers' dysfunctional cognitive schemas have adverse effects on their work life. We also test several mediation models to clarify the mechanisms linking distributed leadership to school outcomes.

In the third study, we address the limitations of the previous study and respond to future research directions by combining structural and functional perspectives on distributed leadership. This approach helps disentangle its positive and negative effects on teacher job satisfaction and performance. Specifically, we demonstrate that structural distributed leadership has distinct relationships with organizational identification, empowerment, and perceived leader support compared to its functional counterpart. We also test mediation mechanisms, such as perceived leader support, organizational identification, and empowerment, to better explain the associations between distributed leadership and teacher outcomes.

The final problematic aspect examined in this thesis concerns conflict management in schools. Although principals are critical players in managing conflict, there is limited knowledge regarding how their gender influences conflict management strategies and how these, in turn, affect the school climate. Key questions include: How does conflict management shape the academic climate as perceived by teachers, parents, or students? What constitutes effective conflict management in educational settings? These questions are addressed in the final study of the thesis. We analyze gender differences in principals' reported conflict management styles and their impact on the school climate as evaluated by both teachers and parents. Using a multi-source and multi-

method design, we test a mediation model showing that conflict management strategies mediate the relationship between principal gender and both the emotional climate (as reported by teachers) and the social climate (as perceived by parents). In doing so, we uncover how principal gender indirectly influences school climate through preferred conflict resolution styles.

Grounded in current literature and the aforementioned concerns, this Ph.D. thesis, comprising four empirical studies, offers greater theoretical and practical clarity regarding both the positive and negative implications of strategic educational management in Romania. It clarifies key constructs, explores complex relationships between school actors, and advances methodological innovation, with implications for educational practice, policy, and future research. Ultimately, this work aims to raise awareness of the critical role that educational managers play and highlights how their strategies, cognitive-strategic complexity, conflict management orientations, and leadership practices shape the educational ecosystems (*see Figure 1*).

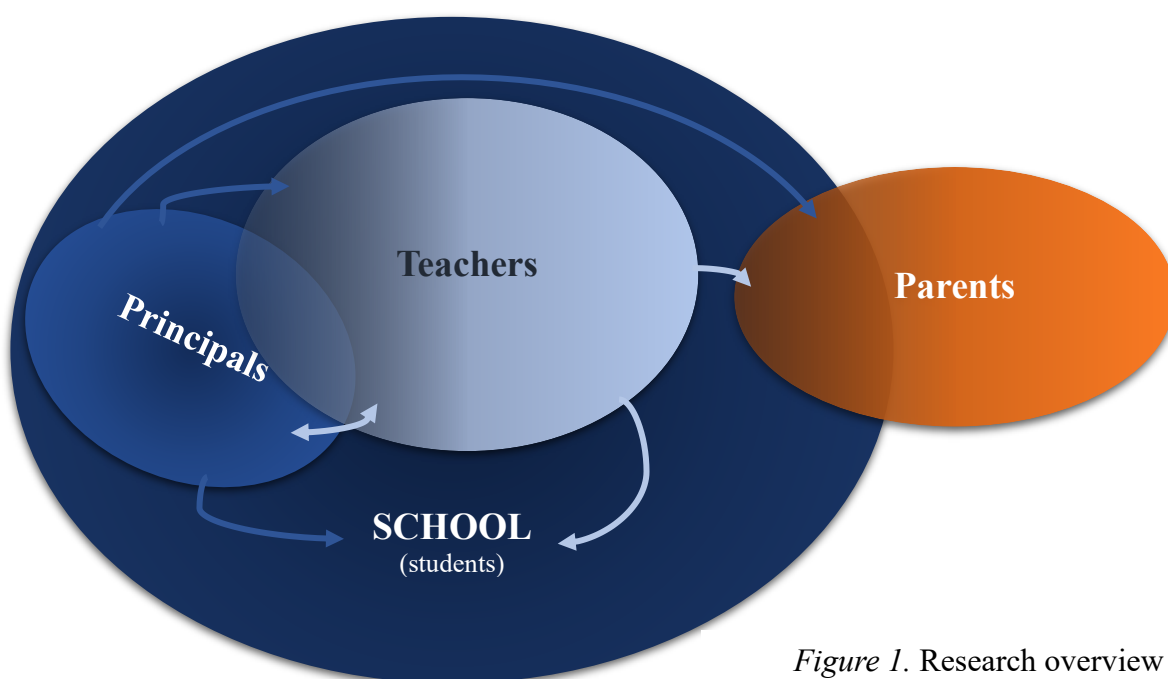


Figure 1. Research overview



CHAPTER II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

2.1 Theoretical, practical and methodological objectives

First of all, our aim is to clarify the impact of educational managers' cognitive-strategic complexity on teachers, parents, and overall school climate. We anticipate to obtain opposing results with existing literature, challenging the "more is better" paradigm regarding strategic thinking. Furthermore, we seek to deepen our understanding of how cognitive-strategic complexity relates to a variety of school-occupational outcomes by testing multiple mediation models.

Similarly, we aim to explore the effects of distributed leadership within and between Romanian schools, and the specific contexts in which it may benefit or hinder key stakeholders, including teachers, principals, the school climate, and even parents. To this end, we test various moderation and mediation relationships, incrementally building upon each study, addressing previous limitations, and responding to current research gaps in the literature. Our goal is to offer a more concrete conceptualization and operationalization of distributed leadership. Adopting a novel interdisciplinary perspective that draws from organizational, educational, and clinical psychology, we also examine the influence of teachers' dysfunctional cognitive schemas on their workplace experience. Finally, we explore how conflict management and principal gender impact inclusive emotional and social climates in schools. The educational field lacks clarity regarding what constitutes "effective" conflict management, its operationalization, and its outcomes. Thus, we investigate a domino effect, beginning with principals' orientation and gender, through their conflict management strategies, and culminating in the school climate as perceived by various educational actors.



2.2. Methodological Objectives

Our first aim is to utilize multi-source and multi-method research designs to mitigate the limitations associated with cross-sectional studies and common method bias. We respond to scholarly calls to integrate multiple data sources and adopt more sophisticated, often multilevel, analytical strategies. Our intention is to include diverse respondent perspectives within our samples to capture different facets of the educational environment, measuring either the same construct or distinct constructs across various actors.

Second, we intend to analyze data across both individual and organizational levels, thus capturing intra- and inter-school dynamics. Another objective is to develop, test, and validate two new qualitative measurement tools: one for conflict management based on critical incident technique (as reported by principals), and another for assessing cognitive-strategic complexity in school principals, both derived from qualitative interviews.

Finally, we aim to conduct complex analyses, including nonlinear models, mediation, moderation, moderated mediation, and factor analyses to provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of the relationships among variables.



2.3. Practical Objectives

From a practical standpoint, we seek to provide clear, evidence-based recommendations to support strategic educational management at all hierarchical levels. Based on our empirical findings and the theoretical and methodological implications mentioned above, we highlight the types of support that school principals and teachers may require to effectively design, implement, adjust, and monitor school-level strategies.

We also identify contextual factors under which distributed leadership is beneficial or detrimental. Building on this, we offer practical recommendations for leveraging distributed leadership to mitigate its potential downsides and amplify its advantages. Moreover, we outline actionable guidelines for effective conflict management in schools, aimed to foster academic outcomes and cultivating a positive school climate. Ultimately, we identify key sources of support that may enable principals, teachers, and parents to perform more effectively and functionally within school contexts.

2.4. General Methodology

To investigate cognitive-strategic complexity, we conducted a study involving 165 school principals who participated in interviews and described their long-term strategic vision for their schools. These responses were subsequently coded and evaluated. The study also included 2,687 teachers from Romanian schools, who reported their level of organizational identification, and 10,080 parents, who evaluated their involvement and perceptions of the academic climate in their children's schools. The sampled institutions ranged from preschools to high schools. Data from parents and teachers were collected via a one-time questionnaire. This cross-sectional, multi-



source, and multi-method design was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The full study is detailed in Chapter 3.1.

To investigate distributed leadership, we conducted two studies. The first involved 3,528 teachers across 329 schools. We collected cross-sectional data, aggregated responses at the school level, and analyzed the effects of structural distributed leadership on school-related outcomes such as organizational identification, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, dysfunctional cognitive schemas, and empowerment. In the second study regarding distributed leadership, we addressed limitations from the previous investigation by adding new scales (e.g., perceived leader support, teacher job performance) and incorporating a refined theoretical and methodological perspective. We gathered cross-sectional data from 2,632 teachers in 203 schools and performed both individual- and school-level analyses. Using the same software, we produced richer, more differentiated findings through association, mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation analyses. Both studies are detailed in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3, and share a consistent multi-source, multi-method approach—with one employing a multilevel structure.

For the study on conflict management, we collected qualitative interview data from 165 school principals, representing various educational levels, on how they handled teacher-teacher, teacher-parent, and teacher-student conflicts. In addition, we surveyed 2,861 teachers and 10,080 parents online, to obtain quantitative insights into the emotional and inclusive social climate in schools. Aggregated school-level mediation analyses were conducted on these data. Details are provided in Chapter 3.4.



CHAPTER III ORIGINAL RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

Study 1: Too complex to follow! Principals' strategic cognitive complexity, teachers' organizational identification and school outcomes¹

This paper presents a multisource and multimethod investigation of the relationship between principals' strategic cognitive complexity (SCC) and school outcomes assessed by parents, as mediated by teachers' identification with the school. We have assessed the SCC of 165 school principals, derived from interviews in which they described their strategy and long-term educational vision for the school. A sample of teachers from these Romanian schools (2687 teachers in total, 360 male) reported their identification with the school and a sample of parents (10080 in total, 1658 male) assessed the school academic climate and reported their engagement with the school. We used a non-linear mediation procedure and show that SCC has an inverted U-shaped association with teachers identification with the school that in turn has a positive association with parents' engagement with the school and their rating of the academic climate. Our results challenge the universality of SCC benefits in schools and point out the importance of exploring diminishing benefits associated with SCC by using multisource data and the “too much of a good thing” theoretical framework as a guide for future research directions in strategic management in schools.

¹ This chapter is based on a published paper: Tucaliuc, M., Curșeu, P. L., Muntean, A. F., & Buzea, I. M. (2024). Too complex to follow! Principals' strategic cognitive complexity, teachers' organizational identification and school outcomes. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 17411432241300277.



3.2. Study 2: Does distributed leadership deliver on its promises in schools?

Implications for teachers' work satisfaction and self-efficacy²

Although surrounded by theoretical confusion and methodological ambiguity, distributed leadership has been acclaimed as beneficial for teacher performance and student achievement. We set out to explore organizational identification and empowerment as two mechanisms that explain the positive and negative association between distributed leadership and teacher work-related outcomes. We build on social identity, social interdependence and cognitive schema theories to argue that teachers' cognitive dysfunctional schema of distrust and dependence moderate the association between distributed leadership on the one hand and organizational identification and empowerment on the other hand. We used multilevel mediation analyses to test our hypotheses in a sample of 3528 teachers, nested in 329 Romanian schools and our overall results reveal a negative association between distributed leadership and empowerment as well as organizational identification. Distrust cognitive schema accentuate the negative association between distributed leadership and empowerment, while dependence schema accentuate the negative association between distributed leadership and organizational identification. Finally, organizational identification mediates the association between distributed leadership and teachers' work self-efficacy as well as satisfaction, while empowerment only mediates the association between distributed leadership and work satisfaction

² This chapter is based on a published paper: Tucaliuc, M., Curșeu, P. L., & Muntean, A. F. (2023). Does distributed leadership deliver on its promises in schools? Implications for teachers' work satisfaction and self-efficacy. *Education Sciences*, 13(10), 1058.



3.3. Study 3: The Bright and Dark Sides of Distributed Leadership in Schools:

A Joint Structural and Functional Perspective on Distributed Leadership, Work

Performance and Job Satisfaction³

This study combines a structural and functional perspective on distributed leadership to disentangle its beneficial and detrimental effects on job satisfaction and work performance. Specifically, we explore the interaction between structural (SDL) and functional distributed leadership (FDL) on leadership support, organizational identification, and empowerment. This study also tests the mediating role of leadership support, organizational identification and empowerment as mechanisms that explain the association between distributed leadership and work-related outcomes in teachers. We used a multilevel mediation analysis to test the overall model in a sample of 2632 teachers embedded in 203 Romanian schools. The results replicate previous findings regarding the negative association between SDL and empowerment and identification and show that FDL has an overall positive association with leadership support, identification, and empowerment, as well as with job satisfaction and work performance reported by teachers. SDL had a negative indirect association with job satisfaction mediated by leadership support and with work performance mediated by organizational identification. The association between FDL and job satisfaction was significantly mediated by leadership support, identification, and empowerment within schools. Finally, the association between FDL and work performance was significantly mediated by organizational identification within as well as between schools.

³ This chapter is based on a published paper: Tucaliuc, M., Ratiu, L., Curseu, P. L., & Muntean, A. F. (2025). *The Bright and Dark Sides of Distributed Leadership in Schools: A Joint Structural and Functional Perspective on Distributed Leadership, Work Performance and Job Satisfaction*. *Education Sciences*, 15(4), 481.



3.4. Study 4: Balancing acts:

An exploration of principals' conflict management styles and school climate⁴

The fourth article explores gender differences in school principals' conflict management styles and their effects on school climate, as perceived by teachers and parents. Using a multi-source, multi-method design, we test an integrated mediation model. Conflict management styles were assessed based on interviews with 165 principals, who described how they manage various types of conflicts: teacher-teacher, teacher-parent, and teacher-student. Teachers subsequently rated the emotional climate of their schools, while parents evaluated the inclusive social climate. Aggregated school-level mediation analyses show that relationship-oriented conflict strategies mediate the association between principal gender and school climate outcomes. Specifically, relationship-oriented approaches enhance emotional and social climate, while self-focused strategies undermine them. We also found that female principals report higher usage of relationship-oriented strategies than male principals, though no gender differences emerged regarding self-focused strategies. This study contributes a novel qualitative tool for measuring conflict orientations, combining the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) and the dual-concern model (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Rahim & Katz, 2020), and responds to recent calls in the literature for mixed-method investigations of conflict management in schools.

⁴ This study has been submitted for publication at the time of the doctoral thesis submission.



CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Theoretical objectives

Most prior studies on educational strategy have examined either its complexity or effectiveness in isolation. In contrast, we show that teachers' organizational identification serves as a crucial bridge between principals' cognitive-strategic complexity (CSC) and broader school-level outcomes. Our findings indicate that teachers are essentially extensions of their principals' CSC, and that this cognitive feature alone cannot linearly or independently explain school impact.

A strategic planning, no matter how effective, can be authored by multiple agents, including cross-functional teams or the school's leadership unit (Tucaliuc et al., 2023). Yet, responsibility for implementation and evaluation often lies with the school principal. Thus, academic climate is shaped not only by strategy content, but also by its implementation, adaptation over time, and communication. We demonstrated that CSC follows an inverted U-shaped relationship with teachers' identification with the school: low-to-moderate CSC levels foster identification, while higher levels reduce it. This allows us to define an optimal level of CSC, centered around the midpoint of our scale, and debunk the myth that "more is always better", based on the Too much of a good thing theory. Teachers' identification further mediates the relationship between CSC and both parental involvement and perceived school climate.

Turning to distributed leadership, while it is often universally praised in the literature, our studies are among the few empirical findings that document its negative effects on organizational identification, perceived leader support, empowerment, performance, and job satisfaction. Our most significant theoretical contribution in this area is the distinction between structural and



functional distributed leadership, which we captured through both theoretical framing and methodological differentiation. Structural distributed leadership (SDL) was negatively associated with identification, empowerment, and perceived support, while functional distributed leadership (FDL) exhibited positive associations with these constructs. Moreover, SDL influenced negative outcomes through mediators such as reduced identification and empowerment, whereas FDL predicted positive outcomes via the same mediators. This dual-perspective model brings conceptual clarity to a fragmented literature, showing that operationalization matters: different measurement approaches lead to contrasting results.

Another key contribution is the integration of dysfunctional cognitive schemas, typically studied in clinical psychology, into educational organizational research. We provide empirical evidence that teachers with high levels of distrust or dependency schemas report lower empowerment and weaker identification, with consequences for school climate and occupational functioning. Lastly, we highlight the theoretical importance of conflict management orientation and principal gender. Our findings show that relationship-oriented conflict strategies predict positive emotional and social climate outcomes, while self-focused orientations do not. Female principals reported greater use of relationship-oriented strategies in their schools, while no significant gender differences were found for self-focused approaches. In a Romanian educational context, where women overrepresent the educational workforce, this has encouraging implications for relational leadership in schools.

Collectively, these findings underscore the powerful role that principals play in shaping school systems, influencing stakeholder dynamics and organizational processes.



4.2. Methodological objectives

All four studies employed multilevel research designs—aggregating data at the school level while also conducting analyses at both individual and organizational levels. This approach opens new pathways for research in both educational and organizational domains, allowing us to observe system-level dynamics rather than limiting insights to individual actors. Future research would benefit from similarly analyzing macro structures to better capture the relational and systemic exchanges within educational institutions.

Our use of multi-source data collection addresses long-standing calls in leadership and conflict literature for richer, triangulated data (Karakus et al., 2024). By collecting information from principals, teachers, and parents, we gain deeper insights into stakeholder dynamics and cognitive-social-emotional exchanges. Two studies used mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches for constructs such as conflict management and cognitive-strategic complexity. This hybrid design enhances ecological validity and counters common method bias, enabling more accurate interpretations of social realities. Specifically for distributed leadership, our methodological innovation includes differentiating between structural (measured via a single-item distribution indicator) and functional leadership (measured using a newly validated scale). These instruments reflect distinct facets of the same overarching construct and clarify the source of contradictory findings in the literature.

We also developed two original qualitative assessment tools. For CSC, we adapted the Integrative Complexity Model (Baker-Brown et al., 1990), aligning it with educational strategic planning. This scale can be used across contexts, over time, and with multiple data sources (e.g.,



interviews, strategic plans, public addresses). For conflict orientation, we designed an instrument based on the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) and the Dual Concern Model (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). This tool captures both relational and self-focused orientations in conflict resolution. These methodological contributions provide robust tools and frameworks for future educational research across cultures and contexts.

4.3. Practical objectives

Regarding cognitive-strategic complexity, based on the first study of this thesis, a practical implication is the awareness of the importance of cognitive-strategic complexity and the adaptation of strategic discourse to ensure stronger teacher identification with their respective schools. We believe that participation in training programs that prepare principals for their strategic and relational responsibilities could help them adjust their complexity and subsequently create more synergy with teachers (Tucaliuc et al., 2023). Another important aspect is the construction and implementation of strategies that school members can understand and resonate with, as highly complex strategies may constitute a barrier for teachers and school staff. Thus, a practical implication we draw is to recognize the responsibility of principals to clearly communicate the school's strategy and its implementation to teachers and auxiliary staff, regardless of the level of strategic complexity. Our recommendation for principals is to create comprehensive strategies that can support schools in a volatile environment (Florian & Țoc, 2018; Muntean et al., 2022; Tucaliuc et al., 2023), which they then communicate in accessible language to school personnel, so they can be easily understood and implemented. We recommend that school leaders develop communication skills, as excessive complexity in their strategic thinking that is not translated in a



meaningful way to others can be detrimental to teachers' identification with the school. They should translate their cognitive-strategic complexity to all school members, speaking their language and using effective communication tools and channels. Another practical recommendation for principals is to involve teachers in building the school strategy, as this can make them more engaged, involved, and present in the future implementation of strategic directions. Also, the school's mission, vision, and strategy will be much clearer and easier to implement for teachers if they are part of the educational strategy development process. Additionally, we found that parents are an important educational resource for schools, as they can create educational synergy by participating in school activities and contributing time, expertise, knowledge, or material resources to improve educational processes. It is important that teachers can involve parents in school life and encourage their active participation in various educational activities. Teachers are the linking-pin between principals, the school's educational strategy, and parents. Therefore, it is important that teachers benefit from mentoring, coaching sessions, or training in which they learn and find solutions to involve parents in school life.

The next two studies in the thesis refer to distributed leadership, which we know dominates the literature on educational management, with leadership and administration becoming nearly normative for those who lead schools (Mifsud, 2023). Such normativity poses significant challenges because the tendency of educational administrators is to use distributed leadership in a free and indiscriminate manner. School leaders should build organizational structures in such a way as to avoid hierarchical fragmentation that could weaken leader support, organizational identification, and reduce the empowerment perceived by teachers. Then, another practical implication we draw from both studies is that merely assigning leadership roles to different



teachers does not necessarily generate positive outcomes in terms of organizational identification, empowerment, and ultimately, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and work performance. We encourage school principals to ensure that teachers taking on such leadership roles are prepared to handle the relational complexity that comes with leadership roles. Also, it is essential that teachers have sufficient resources and training opportunities to help them grow into leadership roles, so they can later perform them efficiently and without excessive occupational demands. Thus, we join the voices who (Eryilmaz et al., 2023; Tucaliuc et al., 2023; Tucaliuc et al., 2024) ask for professional development and training programs in leadership skills for both teachers and principals, to facilitate the effective implementation of distributed leadership practices. We are aware that in large schools it is important to assign leadership roles to multiple staff members, but considering our results and the cultural specifics of our sample, we advise school leadership to avoid the dilution of leader power and to offer concrete guidance, clear definitions, and allocation of leadership responsibilities to ensure teacher empowerment. The second set of practical implications refers to increasing teachers' perceived power and autonomy, emphasizing rather functional than structural approaches to distributed leadership. Educational managers could create a safe environment in which school staff participate and take on emergent, autonomous, and self-organized leadership functions or processes, which could evolve and later improve school outcomes. Another extremely relevant implication of our thesis refers to the importance of dysfunctional cognitive schemas in the school environment, and generally in the organizational context. In schools, principals should facilitate a work environment that does not favor the activation of teachers' mistrust schemas, as these negatively affect empowerment, organizational identification, and teacher satisfaction. The dependency schema reduces work self-efficacy and, in



combination with distributed leadership, appears to significantly lower organizational identification. Although we cannot strongly claim that distributed leadership may determine a work environment favorable to the activation of mistrust or dependency schemas, we can still argue that it is extremely important to create an environment in which teachers feel trust and psychological safety, especially in schools where distributed leadership is practiced. Regarding policy implications, our results call for the implementation of professional development programs for educational leaders, to equip them with effective delegation skills for leadership responsibilities, participative implementation practices that increase teachers' autonomy and power in school decision-making. A specific implication refers to the introduction of school evaluation systems that consider teacher involvement and autonomy, ensuring that educational leadership facilitates participation in decision-making. Such policies require that single-leader educational approaches be complemented with participative work design, so that regardless of the number of formal leaders in a school, teachers can get involved and assume leadership tasks or roles, supporting the overall educational process.

Regarding conflict management, based on the results of the last study in this thesis and its theoretical argumentation, we help practitioners by highlighting the negative impact of self-oriented strategies in managing school conflicts. Our results show that school principals should focus on relationship-based approaches in managing conflicts within their institutions and avoid the use of egocentric strategies, as these negatively affect the socio-emotional climate in schools. We join the voices calling for school leadership professional development programs (Adams & Adigun, 2024; Keser Ozmantar & Gök, 2024; Tucaliuc et al., 2023) that should equip principals with the managerial tools they need to lead effectively. Such professional development programs



should endow principals with the relational skills needed to create a harmonious and inclusive work environment. Too often, school principals are expected to perform well and lead effectively without being offered the support and training required to face the complexity of relational environments they encounter daily. Regarding other interventions, we could assist, advise, guide, mentor, and coach male principals so that they more frequently adopt relationship-oriented conflict management strategies and bring more organizational and relational benefits to the schools they lead.

We believe the proposed suggestions, derived from the practical implications of the studies in this thesis, should be critically evaluated since our conclusions are based on data collected within a unique cultural context and using very specific operationalizations of certain variables.

4.4. Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

Despite its complexity and comprehensiveness, the present thesis is not without limitations. These should be critically acknowledged when interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions. We also outline future research directions that could help overcome these constraints and further refine the empirical contributions of this work.

The first limitation, common to all studies, lies in the cross-sectional design of data collection and analysis. This restricts the capacity to draw causal inferences and increases susceptibility to common method bias. Additionally, the correlational nature of most designs and the absence of variable manipulation further limit causal interpretations. We attempted to mitigate this by testing interaction effects within cross-sectional frameworks—an approach not known to inflate results (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). Moreover, most studies involved multi-source



data (from principals, teachers, and parents), and we used multilevel modeling and CFA (confirmatory factor analysis), achieving strong model fit indicators. Still, while many results were based on aggregated school-level data, some effects were also observed at the individual level.

Another limitation in the CSC study arises from the multi-year data collection process (spanning three years across different schools), which may have introduced temporal or contextual biases. Although the analyses aggregated data at the school level, individual perceptions of school climate—especially among parents and teachers—could vary based on specific interactions with school leadership.

Regarding the measurement tools, all articles relied on self-reported scales from teachers and parents. Although we attempted to reduce bias by sourcing data from different actors, self-reporting remains inherently limited. Then, some constructs were also measured using single-item scales (e.g., satisfaction, organizational identification, empowerment, structural distributed leadership). While these items have demonstrated validity and reliability in prior literature (Allen et al., 2022), they provide only a global snapshot, lacking depth across construct dimensions.

In the CSC study, interview responses were coded using numeric indicators. While practical, this approach may oversimplify the cognitive richness of principals' discourse and overlook contextual factors that shape their strategic thinking. Likewise, the mixed-methods approach used in the conflict management study—particularly the interviews—may introduce bias despite efforts to ensure inter-rater reliability and consensus coding. Various unmeasured variables may also influence our findings. For example, future studies could assess how teachers perceive their principals' conflict management strategies—rather than relying solely on principals' self-



reports. This perspective could be used as a predictor in mediation models explaining school climate. In the CSC study, we examined teachers' identification as a mediator, but did not account for leaders' communication styles. Strong communication skills may moderate the nonlinear relationship between CSC and organizational identification. Additional mediators such as team cohesion, job engagement, or organizational citizenship behaviors could also be explored to better understand these relationships. Another promising direction is to evaluate principals' individual cognitive functioning (e.g., rationality or cognitive distortions), going beyond articulated visions to assess deeper cognitive processes (Scholtes et al., 2024). These could serve as alternative explanatory mechanisms or confounding variables. Finally, a universal limitation across all studies is that data were collected within a single cultural context: Romania. Cultural norms influence all constructs studied. For instance, Romania has a high power-distance regarding to Hofstede dimensions, which may interact with distributed leadership practices. The Romanian educational system is also heavily regulated and often volatile, placing significant occupational strain on school leaders. Such a context could shape strategic thinking, leadership behavior, and conflict preferences in unique ways.

We encourage future research to investigate similar models across different cultural and institutional systems, enhancing external validity and enabling cross-contextual generalizations.



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