THE MODERATING EFFECT OF THE FORM MASTER TEACHER'S LEADERSHIP STYLE ON THE TEACHER-TO-STUDENT TRANSMISSION OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to analyse the correspondence relation between students' styles of handling interpersonal conflicts (i.e., integrating, avoiding, dominating, obliging, and compromising) and their teacher's perceived style. The moderating effect of the teacher's leadership style (i.e., relation-oriented, task-oriented, and change-oriented) on this relation was also analysed. Participants in this study were 241 high-school students. Regarding the correspondence relations, results revealed significant positive correlations between the teacher's perceived style of handling conflict and the students' ones. Leadership styles were also significantly positively correlated with the integrating and compromising handling conflict styles, and negatively correlated with the avoiding and obliging styles. Moreover, only the relation-oriented leadership style had a significant moderating effect on the abovementioned correspondence relation, and only regarding the integrating and avoiding styles.

Key words*: leadership style, student, style of handling conflict, teacher*

Theoretical framework

Generally, conflict refers to situations in which two or more people partially or totally disagree on certain problems because of their different perspectives. Any conflict situation implies a sort of

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incompatibility between parties, as well as an interaction between them (Callahan et al., 1986). A relatively recent study (Zaharia, 2011) showed that, in our educational environment, most of the school conflicts rise between two students. There are also conflicts between students and a specific teacher, but these are quite rare and are due to students' grades or their improper behaviour. When conflicts appear, their management depends on the class students and/or the teachers, especially the form master teacher.

The way the involved parties approach and, eventually, deal with a conflict situation depends on an important individual characteristic, namely their *personal style of handling interpersonal conflict*. One of the typologies of these styles proposes a bi-dimensional analysis, considering both the concern for the self and the concern for others (Rahim, 1983; Rahim & Magner, 1995). By combining the low and high levels of these two dimensions, there can be distinguished the following management conflict styles: *dominating* (high level of self-concern and a low concern for the others), *obliging* (the opposite of dominating), *integrating* (high concern for both the self and the others), *compromising* (moderate concern for both parties), and *avoiding* (low concern for both parties). The integrating and the compromising styles are considered to be the most desirable and, theoretically, the most effective, as they combine both assertiveness and the concern for others, and they imply the individual's attempt to reach a convenient solution for all parties involved in the conflict situation (Cornille et al., 1999). Previous studies conducted in educational settings showed that teachers' tendency to use these two handling conflict styles positively correlates with teaching experience and with efficient class management (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006).

Based on the fact that the teacher is, in fact, also a leader of the class (cf. Harrison, 2011), it would be reasonable to think that the efficiency of his actions, including his/ her management of conflict situations in the class, is significantly influenced by his leadership style. The analysis of the behaviours of efficient leaders initially distinguished between those *structure/task-oriented*, and those *relation-oriented* (Likert, 1961; Fleishman, 1961). The first type refers to those behaviours facilitating formal task accomplishment through clearly defining members' roles and responsibilities, as well as through planning and structuring the activities and procedure. The second type refers to relational behaviours oriented towards enhancing members' motivation, cooperation and participation in decision-making processes; a more relation-oriented teacher emphasizes bilateral communication, as well as mutual trust and respect, showing concern, support and consideration for his students. A third dimension of analysis was later proposed, namely *change-oriented* behaviour, describing a leader who has a vision, accepts new ideas,

makes quick decisions, encourages cooperation, but who is not cautious and does not specify or clarify the plan or strategy to follow (Ekvall et al., 1987). In the educational environment a change-oriented teacher encourages innovative thinking, values the experimentation of new strategies, takes risks in order to promote changes, or seeks new solutions to various problems. However, oftentimes an efficient teacher should employ a participative leadership, alternating the task-oriented behaviours with the relation-oriented behaviours. A teacher almost exclusively task-oriented will be successful only up to a point; his/ her students will have a good performance but, after a while, the emotional climate during classes will be stressful and rigid, possibly inhibiting their potential and decreasing their performance. On the other hand, a predominantly relation-oriented teacher will approach learning tasks in a less rigorous or demanding manner and, despite the relaxed and positive emotional climate during classes, students' performance might be reduced.

The present study

According to previous research abovementioned (Zaharia, 2011), in school conflict situations students usually go to the form master teacher, the teacher on duty, or the school principle. As their form master teacher is the closest to them, his/ her leadership style and his/ her conflict management style significantly influence both the quality of his/ her relation to the class, and the way school conflicts are dealt with. In the present research we were interested not in the direct influence of these teacher's characteristics on the students' achievement and motivation, but on the indirect, more subtle influence of these styles on the students' interpersonal behaviours. Given the fact that the form master teacher is a leader and a role model highly likely to be imitated due to his/ her superiority in both status and competence (see Sălăvăstru, 2004), the aim of our study was to investigate the correspondence relations between his/ her conflict management style as it is perceived by his/ her students and their own styles of handling interpersonal conflicts. Specifically, we wanted to see if the teacher's style is imitated, in other words, to see if it is mirrored in the students' tendency to employ the same style in their own conflict management. Moreover, we verified the moderating effect of the form master teacher's leadership style on the relations abovementioned, hypothesizing that his/ her influence as a role model depends on his/ her orientation towards interpersonal relations and communication with his/ her students.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants in this study were 241 high-school students, 125 boys and 116 girls, with ages ranging from 16 to 19 (M = 17.39, SD = 1.04). Participation in the research project was entirely voluntary and anonymous. All measures were in paper-and-pencil format with instructions given in writing, and were administered by the researcher.

Instruments

Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983) was adapted and applied for measuring students' self-assessment of conflict handling styles (Form C) and students' perception about their teacher's conflict handling styles (Form A). This 35-item questionnaire was used to assess five independent factors, each representing a specific style of handling interpersonal conflicts: integrating, avoiding, dominating, obliging, and compromising. Ratings were made on a five-point Likert scale, from *1 = not at all* to *5 = very characteristic*. The Leadership behaviour questionnaire (Ekvall, G. & Arvonen, J., 1991) was adapted and applied for measuring students' perceptions about their teacher's leadership style. This 36-item questionnaire was used to assess three leadership styles: task-oriented, relation-oriented, and change-oriented. The answer was registered on a four-point Likert scale, from *0 = seldom or never* to *3 = most of the time*, indicating how often the behaviour occurs in their form master teacher.

Statistics

All data analyses were conducted with SPSS 20.0. The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test bivariate associations between teacher's perceived style of handling conflict and the students' one. To examine the moderating effect of relation-oriented leadership style on the relationship between teacher's styles and students' styles, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses following recommendations made by Aiken and West (1991). The moderating effect was analysed by the interaction effect between relation-oriented leadership style and teacher's conflict management styles. The continuous variables in the interaction terms were mean-centred before being entered in the regression analysis. The predictor variables were included in three steps: (1) relation-oriented leadership style, (2) teacher's conflict management styles corresponding to students' styles, (3) relation-oriented leadership style and conflict management styles.

Results

The results (see Table 1) show significant and positive correlations between teacher's perceived style of handling conflict and the students' corresponding one. Thus, the teacher's perceived dominating style shows a strong correlation with the dominating style used by students, while positive correlations are average in relation to the integration, obliging, and compromising styles. There is a weak positive correlation between the avoiding style used by the teacher and the corresponding style used by students.

Table 1. *Bivariate correlations between the teacher's perceived styles of handling conflict and the corresponding students' styles*

Teacher's styles	Alfa Cronbach	Students' styles				
		1	2	3	4	5
1. Integrating	.821	.433**				
2. Avoiding	.619		.188**			
3. Dominating	.705			.539**		
4. Obliging	.668				.488**	
5. Compromising	.642					.425**
Alfa Cronbach		.798	.559	.680	.650	.497

Note: **$p \leq .01$

Next, we analysed the relationship between the teachers' leadership styles and their conflict management styles, as they are perceived by their students. The results show that leadership styles (task-oriented, relation-oriented, and change-oriented) correlate with all conflict management styles, excepting with the dominating style (see Table 2). There are significant strong positive correlations between the integrating style and all the three teacher's leadership styles. There are also significant moderate positive correlations between the compromising style and the relation-oriented and the change-oriented teacher's leadership styles, as well as a significant but low positive correlation between compromising style and the task-oriented leadership style. There are also significant low negative correlations between avoiding style and relation-oriented and change-oriented leadership styles, and a significant moderate negative correlation between avoiding style and task-oriented leadership style. Finally, there are significant low negative correlations between the obliging style and all the three teachers' leadership styles.

Table 2. *Bivariate correlations between leadership styles and conflict management styles used by teachers, in students' perception*

Leadership styles	Alfa Cronbach	Teacher's conflict management styles				
		Integrating	Avoiding	Dominating	Obliging	Compromising
Task-oriented	.880	.528[**]	-.306[**]	ns.	-.285[**]	.284[**]
Relation-oriented	.882	.585[**]	-.284[**]	ns.	-.206[**]	.344[**]
Change-oriented	.854	.532[**]	-.231[**]	ns.	-.192[**]	.312[**]

Note: [**]$p \leq .01$

The moderating effect of relation-oriented leadership style on the relationship between teachers' perceived styles of handling interpersonal conflicts and the students' ones

According to our results (see Table 3), in the regression model predicting the students' integrating style, the main effects of both relation-oriented leadership style and the teacher's perceived corresponding conflict management style are significant, accounting for, together with the interaction effect, 23.5 % of the integrating style variance. More specifically, the higher the relation-oriented teacher's leadership style and the higher the teacher's integrating style, the higher the students' tendency to use the integrating style. We also found that the interaction effect meets the conditions for a significant moderation. The increment in the squared multiple correlation is significantly greater than zero, $\Delta R^2 = .045$, p < .01; and the coefficient β of the interaction term was significantly greater than zero, β = .260, p < .01. This interaction brings a low but significant explanatory addition (4.5 %) in predicting students' integrating style, together with the main effects of teacher's corresponding style and relation-centred leadership style.

Table 3. *Summary of the hierarchical regression analysis for the variables predicting students' conflict management styles*

	Student's integrating style		Student's avoiding style		Student's dominating style		Student's obliging style		Student's compromising style	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.089**		.008		.002		.001		.001	
Relation-oriented		.299**		.091		−.050		−.029		−.031
Step 2	.101**		.050*		.289**		.243**		.215**	
Relation-oriented		.069		.157*		−.002		.075		−.201**
Corresponding style		.392**		.232*		.539**		.504**		.494**
Step 3	.045**		.037*		.008		.023**		.016*	
Relation-oriented		.156*		.086		−.012		.032		−.162*
Corresponding style		.474**		.243*		.529**		.492**		.527**
Relation-oriented x Corresponding style		.260**		.206*		.088		.157		.141
R^2	.235		.095		.299		.267		.232	

Note: *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$

Further, in the regression model predicting the students' avoiding style, the main effect of the teacher's corresponding perceived style is also significant, explaining 5% of the variance. Specifically, the higher the teacher's avoiding style, the higher the students' tendency to use the avoiding style. The main effect of relation-oriented leadership style is not significant. It was also found that the interaction term meets the assumptions for a significant moderation. The increment in the squared multiple correlation is significantly greater than zero, $\Delta R^2 = .037$, $p < .01$; and the

coefficient β of the interaction term is significantly greater than zero, β = .206, p < .01. The interaction brings a low but significant explanatory addition (3.7 %) in predicting the students' avoiding style, together with the main effect of the teacher's corresponding style.

Analysing the models that predict the dominating and obliging styles, the main effect of relation-oriented leadership is not significant, but the effect of the teacher's perceived corresponding styles is. For the dominating style, the teacher's corresponding style explains 28.9% of its variance; for the obliging style, the teacher's corresponding style explains 24.3% of the variance. On the other hand, following the model that predicts the students' compromising style, we observe that the main effects of both the relation-centred teacher's leadership style and teacher's perceived corresponding conflict management style are significant, together accounting for 21.6% of the compromising style variance. More specifically, the lower the relation-oriented leadership style and the higher the teacher's compromising style, the higher the students' tendency to employ the compromising style. In these last three regression models the interaction effect is not significant.

Following the procedures outlined by Hayes and Matthes (2009), Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the above-mentioned interaction effects for the integrating and avoiding styles. For the integrating style, there is a significant positive correlation between the students' integrating style and the teacher's corresponding perceived style for both high relation-oriented leadership style (B = .640, p < .01), moderate relation-oriented leadership style (B = .461, p < .01) and low relation-oriented leadership style (B = .282, p < .01), the strength of the association decreasing along with the decrease of the relation-oriented style.

For the avoiding style, there is a significant positive correlation between the students' avoiding style and the teacher's corresponding perceived style for both high relation-oriented leadership style (B = .410, p < .01) and moderate relation-oriented leadership style (B = .229, p < .01), but not for the low relation-oriented leadership style (B = .048, p > .05).
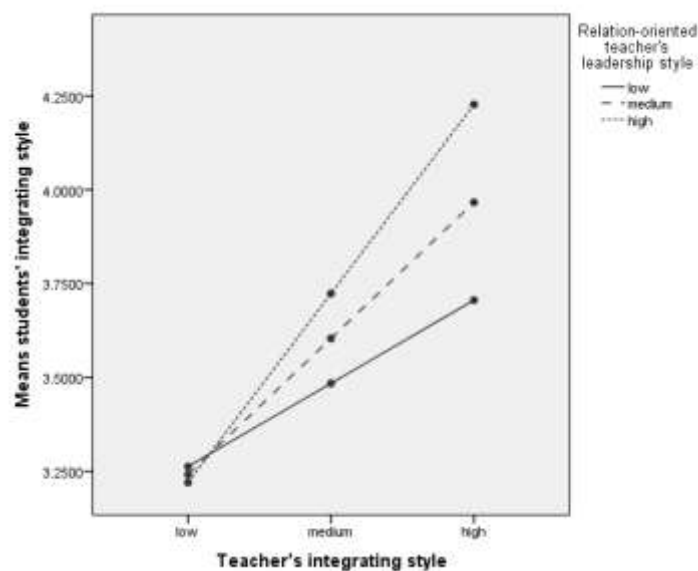
Figure 1. *The moderating effect of relation-oriented teacher's leadership style on the relation between the teacher's perceived integrating style of handling conflict and the students' one*
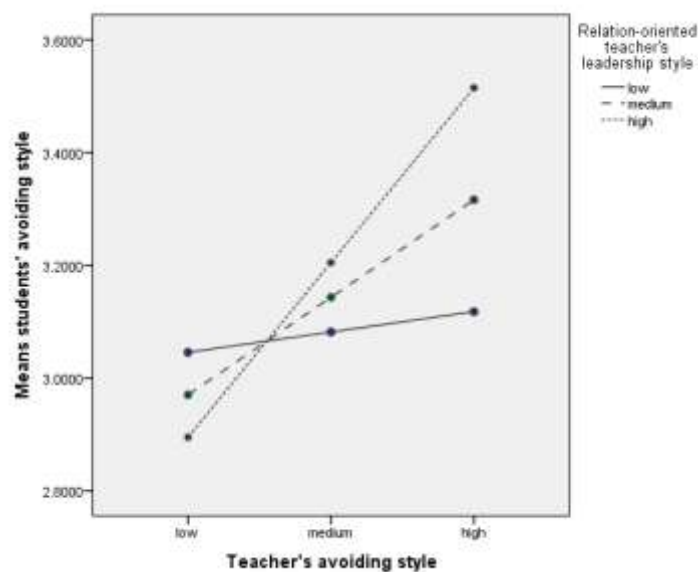

Figure 2. *The moderating effect of the relation-oriented teacher's leadership style on the relation between the teacher's perceived avoiding style of handling conflict and the students' one*

Discussion

Based on the analogy between a leader and a form master teacher, as well as on the latter's possible influence on his/ her students' interpersonal conduct, the first objective of the present research was to investigate the relation between the form master teacher's conflict management style (as it is perceived by his class) and the students' own styles of handling conflicts with their peers. The results show significant positive correlations between the teacher's and the students' conflict management styles; moreover, the teacher's style is a significant predictor of the same style employed by his/ her students, thus validating the hypothesized idea of transmission or of teacher's-students' styles correspondence. The strongest correspondence is for the dominating style; this might be explained by the adolescents' stronger orientation towards agentic behaviours which support their self-assertion in front of others, thus increasing their tendency to adopt the dominating style perceived at a higher status person, with authority, like their form master teacher.

Our results also reveal that all three leadership styles correlate negatively with the less desirable conflict management styles (i.e., avoiding and obliging), and positively with the adaptive styles of handling conflicts (i.e., integrating and compromising), the strongest correlations being with the integrating style. This result emphasizes the idea that it is important for a teacher to adopt a participative leadership, alternating the relation-oriented behaviours with those that are task- and change-oriented, all three favouring the presence of an efficient, integrative conflict management. Moreover, developing these leadership styles leads teachers to a lower tendency to employ negative conflict handling styles during classes, this, in turn, leading to a lower frequency of these styles among students.

The second objective of our study was to investigate the moderating effect of the form master teacher's leadership style on the transmission of the conflict management styles. As already argued, we hypothesized that the perception of the teacher as a role model and, consequently, the power of his/ her influence on the students' interpersonal conduct is influenced by the way he/ she emphasizes interpersonal relations and communication. Our results show that only the relation-oriented leadership style has a moderating effect only on the correspondence of the integrating and avoiding styles of handling conflicts. Specifically, relation-oriented leadership enhances the transmission of the integrating style from teacher to students, the higher the relation-orientation, the higher the correspondence of the conflict management styles. On the other hand, only the medium and the high levels of relation-orientation leadership favour the transmission of the teacher's avoiding style of handling interpersonal conflicts, this correspondence becoming

non-significant at a low level of the teacher's relation-oriented behaviour. Corroborating these two moderating effects, we might conclude that it is good for a form master teacher to develop a relation-oriented leadership style and to emphasize the importance of interpersonal relations. Yet, it is equally important the message that he/ she transmits through his/ her management conflict style: rather than avoiding a conflict for the sake of maintaining interpersonal relations, it is better to face it and optimally manage it by employing an integrating style which combines self-affirmation and the consideration for the other.

To summarize, the results of the present study reveal both a significant relation between the teacher's behaviour and his/ her students' interpersonal conduct in conflict situations, as well as a significant influence of the teacher's leadership style on this relation. Therefore, a first recommendation useful in educational settings would be that the training programmes for teachers should comprise also elements related to leadership styles and conflict management styles. More specifically, these training programmes should focus on developing a more participative leadership (implying the ability to have a flexible orientation on relations, tasks, or change, depending on the specificity of an educational situation), combined with conflict management strategies focused on enhancing the integrating and compromising styles, and on diminishing the avoiding, dominating and obliging styles, respectively.

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