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Adaptive Leadership In Conflict Management In Secondary Schools: A Systems Thinking-Based Case Study

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Abstract

This study examines the role of adaptive leadership in conflict management within secondary schools amid increasingly complex educational transformations. A qualitative approach employing a case study design was conducted at SMA Negeri 2 Satu Atap Baamang Sampit, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis and were analyzed using the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that adaptive leadership is manifested through flexible decision-making, open communication, and active stakeholder involvement in conflict resolution processes. School conflicts primarily arise from differences in work perceptions, communication barriers, and policy changes. The study concludes that adaptive leadership plays a pivotal role in mitigating conflicts and fostering a collaborative and stable school climate by promoting responsive, participatory, and systems-oriented approaches. These findings highlight the importance of adaptive leadership competencies in supporting effective school management and organizational resilience in the face of ongoing educational change.

Keywords: adaptive leadership; conflict management; secondary schools; systems thinking; educational leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Social transformation, rapid advances in digital technology, and the increasing complexity of educational organizations have significantly reshaped leadership demands in schools. Educational institutions no longer function solely as centers for knowledge transmission; rather, they operate as dynamic organizations that must continuously adapt to policy changes, evolving workplace cultures, and increasing demands for collaboration among stakeholders. In this context, adaptive leadership has emerged as an important leadership approach because it emphasizes a leader's ability to adjust strategies, behaviors, and decision-making processes in response to complex and uncertain situations (Marlar, 2025; Werner & Yawson, 2025).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that adaptive leadership contributes to organizational effectiveness by strengthening collaboration, promoting responsive decision-making, and enhancing organizational resilience in the face of change (Murugan et al., 2025; Seibel et al., 2023). Within educational settings, this approach is particularly relevant for supporting digital transformation initiatives and improving the quality of school management (Hongo et al., 2026; Katsikas, 2025). However, the dynamics of school organizations cannot be separated from the emergence of both structural and interpersonal conflicts.

Conflicts in secondary schools frequently arise from differences in work-related perceptions, ineffective communication, and pressures associated with educational policy reforms and the digitalization of learning. Such conflicts may occur among teachers, administrative staff, and school leaders and, if not managed effectively, can negatively affect organizational climate and educational effectiveness (Scortzaru et al., 2024; Suengkamolpisut & Singhatong, 2025). In such circumstances, leadership style becomes a critical factor in determining how conflicts are addressed and resolved (Katsikas, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, adaptive leadership offers a more flexible and collaborative approach to conflict management than traditional hierarchical leadership models. In situations characterized by organizational complexity and uncertainty, adaptive leadership has been shown to support risk management and conflict resolution through contextual adaptation and stakeholder engagement (Alanazi et al., 2025; Baldevenites et al., 2025). Furthermore, the systems thinking perspective has gained increasing attention in educational research, viewing schools as interconnected systems in which conflicts emerge from interactions among multiple organizational elements rather than from individual actors alone.

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State of the Art

Research on adaptive leadership has expanded across various disciplines. Werner and Yawson (2025) emphasized adaptive leadership as a theoretical framework that highlights leaders' capacity to respond effectively to complex and changing environments. Similarly, Marlar (2025) found that adaptive leadership contributes significantly to organizational resilience during periods of transformation. Seibel et al. (2023) further demonstrated that adaptive approaches grounded in innovation–adaptation theory improve decision-making effectiveness in complex organizational settings.

Within the educational sector, Katsikas (2025) reported that leadership style significantly influences school organizational climate. Huston and Sherwood (2026) found that adaptive leadership supports digital transformation in educational institutions, while Murugan et al. (2025) highlighted its role in strengthening team collaboration in complex working environments. Despite these contributions, most previous studies have focused on the general characteristics and outcomes of adaptive leadership, with limited attention given to its integration with conflict management in secondary schools.

Research Gap

A review of the existing literature reveals several important research gaps. First, studies on adaptive leadership have predominantly focused on business, healthcare, and technology sectors, while the secondary school context remains relatively underexplored. Second, research on school conflict management continues to rely largely on conventional approaches and has not systematically incorporated adaptive leadership perspectives. Third, the integration of adaptive leadership, systems thinking, and conflict management within secondary education remains limited and has yet to produce a clear implementation framework (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2025; Rahman et al., 2026).

Research Novelty

Addressing these gaps, this study offers a novel contribution by providing empirical insights into adaptive leadership as a strategic approach to conflict management in secondary schools from a systems thinking perspective. Unlike previous studies that primarily conceptualize adaptive leadership as a leadership style, this research examines adaptive leadership as a strategic mechanism for conflict resolution that is integrated with organizational communication processes and systems thinking principles within educational settings.

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Research Objectives

This study aims to analyze the role of adaptive leadership in conflict management within secondary schools. Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the factors influencing the effectiveness of adaptive leadership in conflict management;
2. To describe the mechanisms through which adaptive leadership is implemented in conflict resolution processes; and
3. To formulate an implementation model of adaptive leadership for conflict management in secondary school settings.

Because this study employs a qualitative research approach, no research hypotheses are formulated.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using a single-case study design to explore the implementation of adaptive leadership in conflict management within a secondary school setting. A case study approach was selected because it enables an in-depth and contextualized examination of leadership practices, organizational interactions, and conflict dynamics within a specific educational environment (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted at SMA Negeri 2 Satu Atap Baamang Sampit, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The school was selected purposively due to its relevance to the research focus on adaptive leadership and conflict management in secondary education.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in school leadership and conflict management processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants included the principal, vice principal, teachers, administrative staff, and several students who served as supporting informants for triangulation purposes. The selection criteria required participants to be actively involved in school leadership processes, have experience dealing with organizational conflicts, and possess an understanding of school organizational dynamics.

Data Collection

Data were collected between May and June 2026 through three primary techniques: in-

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depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore leadership practices, conflict-resolution strategies, and organizational communication patterns. Participant observations were undertaken to examine interactions among school members, both formal and informal communication processes, and conflict-management practices in natural settings. In addition, relevant documents, including meeting minutes, internal policies, conflict-management records, and school program reports, were analyzed to support and validate the findings.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing information related to adaptive leadership and school conflict management. The reduced data were subsequently displayed through thematic narratives, matrices, and categorical patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified through comparison across multiple data sources.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through several strategies proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. Source triangulation involved collecting information from principals, teachers, students, and institutional documents, while methodological triangulation combined interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of interpretations, and prolonged engagement enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Research Instrument

The researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation. Supporting instruments included interview protocols, observation guides, and document analysis forms, which facilitated systematic data gathering and analysis.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a systems thinking perspective, which views school conflict as a

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complex phenomenon arising from the interactions among multiple organizational elements rather than from isolated individual factors. From this perspective, conflicts within schools are understood as the result of interconnected processes involving leadership practices, communication patterns, organizational culture, and external environmental influences.

As illustrated in Figure 1, external environmental factors, including social change, digitalization, educational policies, organizational culture, and stakeholder demands, create challenges that require adaptive responses from school leaders. In addressing these challenges, adaptive school leadership functions as a central mechanism that enables schools to respond effectively to changing organizational conditions.

Adaptive leadership subsequently influences organizational communication, promotes systems thinking practices, and supports the implementation of effective conflict management strategies. Through these interconnected processes, schools are expected to develop a more positive organizational climate, reduce the occurrence and intensity of conflicts, and foster the emergence of an adaptive leadership model that supports sustainable school improvement. Therefore, the framework highlights the dynamic relationship between external environmental pressures, adaptive leadership practices, and conflict management outcomes within secondary school settings.

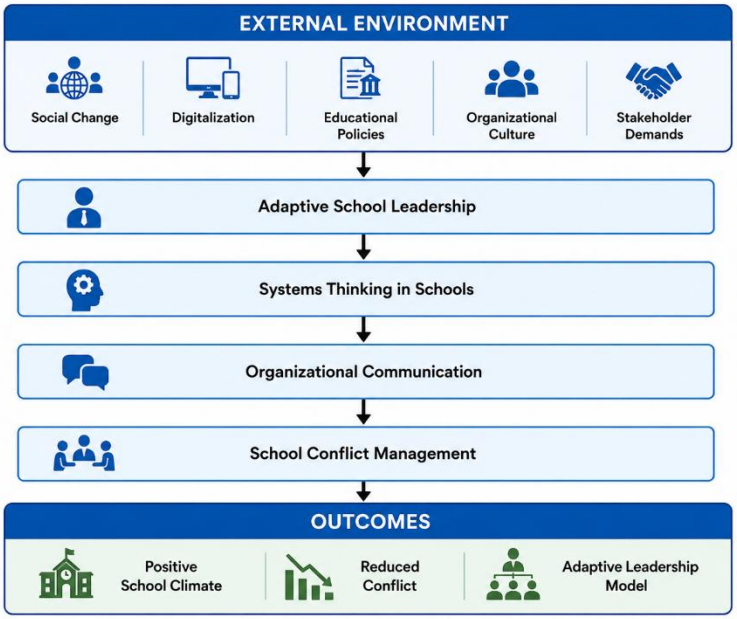


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Adaptive Leadership in School Conflict Management from a Systems Thinking Perspective

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Focus of Analysis

The analysis focused on four key areas: (1) adaptive leadership practices of school principals, (2) organizational communication patterns in conflict management, (3) forms of conflict occurring within the school environment, and (4) systems-based conflict resolution mechanisms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that adaptive leadership plays a significant role in managing conflicts at SMA Negeri 2 Satu Atap Baamang Sampit through flexible, collaborative, and systems-oriented approaches. Rather than relying on rigid administrative procedures, the principal adjusts leadership strategies according to the nature and complexity of the conflicts encountered. The results reveal that most conflicts within the school originate from differences in work perceptions, communication barriers among staff members, and challenges associated with changing educational policies. These findings suggest that school conflicts are not isolated incidents but are closely related to the dynamic interactions among organizational actors and structures.

A notable finding of this study is that conflict resolution is not limited to addressing interpersonal disputes. Instead, adaptive leadership extends conflict management efforts to the improvement of organizational systems, particularly communication patterns and task distribution mechanisms. This indicates that adaptive leadership functions as both a preventive and corrective mechanism. Preventively, it reduces the likelihood of conflict escalation by fostering open communication and collaborative decision-making. Correctively, it facilitates the restructuring of organizational processes that contribute to recurring conflicts.

These findings directly address the objectives of the study. Adaptive leadership emerged as the primary driver of conflict resolution within the school environment. Its effectiveness was influenced by several factors, including open communication, teacher participation, and flexibility in decision-making processes. The implementation of adaptive leadership was characterized by dialogic interactions, adjustments in organizational structures, and strengthened coordination among school stakeholders. Furthermore, the findings support the conceptual framework proposed in this study by demonstrating the integration of adaptive leadership, organizational communication, and systems thinking in conflict management practices.

From a systems thinking perspective, the findings suggest that school conflicts should not be viewed merely as interpersonal disagreements but rather as manifestations of systemic interactions within the organization. This perspective provides a deeper understanding of how

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leadership influences organizational dynamics. When adaptive leadership is applied, the principal does not merely resolve conflicts at the surface level; instead, leadership interventions target the underlying organizational conditions that generate or reinforce conflict. Consequently, conflict management becomes a process of organizational learning and system improvement rather than a series of isolated corrective actions.

The analysis further reveals three interconnected mechanisms through which adaptive leadership contributes to conflict management. First, adaptive leadership involves behavioral flexibility, enabling leaders to modify their leadership approaches according to situational demands and stakeholder needs. Second, adaptive leadership facilitates the reconstruction of organizational communication by creating more participatory and transparent communication channels. Third, adaptive leadership promotes improvements in work systems, including adjustments to task allocation, coordination mechanisms, and decision-making processes. Through these mechanisms, adaptive leadership demonstrates a transformative function by addressing the root causes of conflict and strengthening organizational resilience.

The findings are generally consistent with previous studies that highlight the role of adaptive leadership in enhancing organizational effectiveness under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. Earlier research has demonstrated that adaptive leadership contributes to improved collaboration, organizational resilience, and decision-making quality in complex environments. However, this study extends the existing literature by showing that within the context of secondary schools, adaptive leadership functions not only as a mechanism for organizational adaptation but also as an integrated strategy for conflict management. Unlike studies conducted in business, healthcare, and technology sectors, this research demonstrates how adaptive leadership operates within educational organizations characterized by diverse stakeholders, pedagogical responsibilities, and institutional regulations.

Another important contribution concerns the practical application of systems thinking. Previous studies have often discussed systems thinking as a theoretical framework for understanding organizational complexity. In contrast, the present study demonstrates how systems thinking is translated into everyday school practices through modifications in communication structures, coordination patterns, and conflict resolution processes. This finding highlights the operational value of systems thinking in educational leadership and supports its integration into school management practices.

The study also offers several empirical contributions. First, adaptive leadership is conceptualized not merely as a leadership style but as a systems-based conflict management

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mechanism. Second, school conflict is understood as a systemic phenomenon resulting from interactions among organizational components rather than solely from individual behaviors. Third, the implementation of systems thinking is evidenced through observable changes in communication and coordination practices within the school. Finally, the adaptive leadership model identified in this study reflects the realities of secondary schools in regional contexts, thereby expanding the applicability of adaptive leadership theory beyond modern industrial and corporate settings.

The findings have important implications for educational management and leadership development. School principals should strengthen their adaptive leadership capacities to respond effectively to increasingly complex organizational challenges. Conflict management should move beyond individual-centered approaches and adopt systemic strategies that address underlying organizational issues. Organizational communication should be recognized as a strategic instrument for reducing conflict escalation and fostering collaboration. Furthermore, schools should cultivate collaborative cultures that support shared problem-solving, organizational learning, and sustainable institutional development. By integrating adaptive leadership principles with systems thinking, schools can enhance their capacity to manage conflict constructively and maintain a positive organizational climate in the face of ongoing educational transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that adaptive leadership plays a strategic role in conflict management within secondary schools through flexible decision-making, strengthened organizational communication, and active stakeholder involvement in conflict resolution processes. The findings indicate that adaptive leadership extends beyond situational conflict resolution by addressing and improving the underlying organizational structures and processes that contribute to the emergence of conflicts. As a result, adaptive leadership supports the development of a more stable, collaborative, and sustainable organizational environment.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the educational leadership literature by highlighting the integration of adaptive leadership and systems thinking within the context of secondary schools. The findings suggest that school conflicts should be understood as systemic phenomena arising from interactions among organizational elements rather than solely as interpersonal issues. Consequently, effective conflict management requires leadership approaches that are responsive to both individual and organizational dimensions of conflict.

From a practical perspective, the study underscores the importance of strengthening

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adaptive leadership competencies among school principals, particularly in relation to communication, stakeholder engagement, and organizational problem-solving. Schools are encouraged to adopt systems-based approaches to conflict management in order to enhance organizational resilience and maintain a positive school climate amid ongoing educational change.

Despite these contributions, the findings are limited to a single-case study and therefore may not be generalizable to all educational contexts. Future research is recommended to examine the proposed adaptive leadership model quantitatively across diverse school settings and educational levels. Comparative and mixed-method studies may also provide further insights into the effectiveness of adaptive leadership in managing organizational conflicts in different educational environments.

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