

# Regarding Issues and Affordability of Soft Power in Educational Leadership Theory and Practice

Elena Railean\*

## Abstract

The behaviour of leaders in an educational organisation reflects some kind of power – the ability of a leader to influence others within an organisation and/or the way of removing the obstacles to achieve a goal. Power is an important concept in educational leadership. Nowadays, educational leadership theory adopts the concept of soft power with two instruments: education and culture. However, other concepts related to or/and derived from the power and its impact on the quality of learning outcomes are investigated separately. For instance, at a time when the situation in the educational system is under control, the “leaders of changes” are those who can lead followers to success. The article investigates the concept of power, risk, crisis, and conflict management. It explored correlations between soft power, risk management, and crisis management. Concluding remarks encompass the limits of research in the soft power concept and the importance of studying the subject of soft power in educational management, organisation, and leadership theory.

**Keywords:** Soft Power, Crisis Management, Risk Management, Conflict Management, Data-Driven Educational Management

## Introduction

Power reflects the ability of leaders to influence others within an organisation to achieve specific goals. Advocates of general systems theory associate power with the communication ability of humans (Alvesson, 1996) and the potential to realise power (Habermas & McCarthy, 1977). The more recent leadership theory looks at the style of managers following the culture of the society, organisational climate, and the leader’s competence to

convince others. As was noted by Aslanargun (2011, p. 3), leadership is a power relationship that exists between leaders or followers in an organisation; it is a process that involves utilising power to influence others’ minds and behaviours to meet the organisational goals.

Leadership is like a vehicle, allowing exercising power over others to achieve the goal of an organisation with success, but as was planned and expected by the leader of the organisation. However, the leader of the educational organisation is in a position to arbitrarily use power. For instance, “many recent theories of coercion broaden the scope of the concept coercion by encompassing interactions in which one agent pressures another to act, subject to some further qualifications” (Anderson, 2016). What are the correlations between power and coercion?

In theory, the concept of power includes the following terms: leadership, control, authority, influence, impact; and often, these are interchangeable. According to Fuqua and Newman (2005), one feature of proposed leadership models is the diversification of leadership throughout the organisation in ways that empower individuals to recognise and act upon opportunities to contribute to the organisation in leadership roles. Nevertheless, the role of the power is “to get subordinates to do something in organisation” (Aslanargun, 2011, p. 5).

There are two ways: legitimate power and illegitimate power (i.e. reward power, coercive power, expert power, referent power, and so on). In the first case, the leader is responsible for decisions. Legitimate power may result in dissatisfaction and resistance if not supported by external control and expertise. Moreover, power is different in bureaucratic and democratic educational organisations. Thus, in a bureaucratic organisation, power is an instrument of a leader, whereas in a democratic

\* American University of Moldova, University of Political and Economic European Studies “C. Stere”, Moldova.  
Email: [elenarailean32@gmail.com](mailto:elenarailean32@gmail.com)

organisation, power is shared among all members of the organisation.

Since 1990, the leadership theory has adopted the concept of soft power. Political theorist Joseph Nye of Harvard University coined this term. He described soft power as the ability of a leader to attract and co-opt, rather than coerce, and use economic, cultural, and political force as a means of persuasion (Nye, 1990). However, the concept of soft power in leadership is often linked with education and culture (Amirbek & Ydyrys, 2014), and “it is centered on appeal and cultivation of attraction to alter the behavior of countries to influence policy and agenda-setting” (Nye, 2008).

According to Trilokekar et al. (2020, p. 80), soft power is state-centric and influenced by the realist school of thought in international relations, where states are primary actors, and their role is central to understanding soft power as they propagate it from their identity and values. The problem is that the notion of state is heavily contested in the context of the global nature of social challenges. In line with this approach, the educational organisations that meet the requirements of global citizen education adopt the global competition for minds.

This article aims to analyse the concept of soft power in educational leadership from the perspectives of Metasystems Learning Design Theory. It is the emphasis on the tools of soft power in a diversity of learning environments, and their correlations with crisis, conflict, risk, and consensus. Research on soft power explains educational leadership in terms of power possessed by a leader and the data-driven educational management model.

## The Impact of Soft Power on Educational Leadership Theory and Practice

Power refers to the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way. Soft power refers to the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. Could education and culture be considered instruments of soft power? Looking in the frontier area of management, organisation, and leadership theory, one can observe that *soft power* (i.e., education, culture) is in a dynamic equilibrium with *hard power* (i.e., conflict, crisis, risk, and consensus). For instance, at the beginning of the global crisis in medicine caused by COVID-19,

educational managers agreed to convey face-to-face activities through remote teaching fearing risk of infection by a virus. None of the leaders then thought about the quality of education in remote teaching and the risk of diminishing education if neither teachers nor students have the necessary skills.

One may observe that soft power and hard power interact. According to Henne (2022), there are two different approaches: a) significant material resources are sufficient to gain influence and b) soft power is insufficient on its own, and substitutes new terms to address the role of hard power. The first case could be explained by Haves and Khartit (2021): “due to the unpredictability of global events, many organisations attempt to identify potential crises before they occur to sketch out plans to deal with them”. As such, in the case of a global crisis, most educational organisations shift their doors and use remote and hybrid models of teaching, learning, and assessment. Leaders experience unimaginable disruptions in both internal (i.e. the quality of the learning process) and external (i.e. global context) influences on individual and social behaviour.

The problem is that in the case of a global crisis in education, the soft power of the leader relies on the model of *self-inflicted crisis*. According to Deslandes et al. (2021), self-inflicted crisis refers to the crisis inside the organisation which affects those who are attracted by “games” and “online challenges” to search for emotions and an acceptable “self-image”. However, self-inflicted crisis relies on conflict – a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one, but also on the decision to adopt “other” decisions because of potential risks on behaviour.

A decrease in soft power has given rise to motivational conflict, to manage complex problems and issues. Educational organisations are usually complicit in conflict because of reproducing the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and social relations of dominant groups in society; accordingly, they are usually contributory factors in the conflict. The devastating impact of conflict on educational organisations is the psychological impact on pupils, teachers, and communities, and the indirect degradation of the education system and its infrastructure.

Psychological development aid of future leaders is an important issue of soft power competencies, which

gains much attention from scientists. The conflict in educational settings is the basic response to power. There are three ways: a) resistance, b) compliance, and c) commitment. “Committed teachers are characterised by four qualities: having a desire to be good teachers, being more fact purveyors and sources, recognising and accepting individual worth, and meeting professional responsibilities” (Hariri & Sumintono, 2020). Thus, recent events indicate the soft power of global education.

The soft power of global education established due to the COVID-19 pandemic leads to a new culture of teaching, learning, and assessment. In this global context, one can observe that remote teaching has attracted more adult learners to higher education; the learning environments were diversified; the international students were affected even more than the local disadvantaged groups; and there was reduced international mobility, including suspended or cancelled scholarships. Moreover, soft power on education consists in searching for alternative ways to compensate for the lack of physical mobility (e.g., using open educational software, open textbooks, open universities, and so on). Thus, soft power leads to improvement in infrastructure (i.e., ecosystems models of learning and communication instead of learner-centred learning environment, multiple learning spaces); accessibility of digital devices for all students; identification of new models for teaching, learning, and assessment; and development of guidelines, tools, and didactic materials.

Soft power of the global culture is reported in many scientific articles. Thus, according to Nye (2022), the country’s soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture (when it is attractive to others); its political values, such as democracy; and human rights (when it lives up to them). Henne (2022) observed that soft power interacts with material resources. Moreover, cultural-symbolistic instruments of power vary in form. Soft power could be direct or diffuse. The cultural-symbolic instruments of power are “assets that confer status or signal membership in a status group” and “propaganda, persuasion and other elements of meaning” that are “at work in the deployment, practices, and relations of global power politics” (Goddard et al., 2016, 11). Therefore, soft power is a popular concept in educational leadership, but suffers from imprecision.

## Methodology

Given the critical role of global education in framing soft power, we deliberately chose to analyse the specific features of risk management and conflict, and how it takes up the conversation of changing learning environments and its implications for educational leadership theory and practice. This methodology is particularly important in understanding the role of soft power in modern educational settings and the impact of external factors on the already established balance.

As mentioned, we are focused on two incidents; the first, literature analysis of the impact of soft power on educational leadership outlined above that was released from the perspectives of education and culture; and the second, through analysing the global trends. A systematic scan of the articles published in the ERIC and Google Scholar databases covering the works published in the last ten years was conducted. We also opted to include data from other sources, such as the Google Books Ngram Viewer.

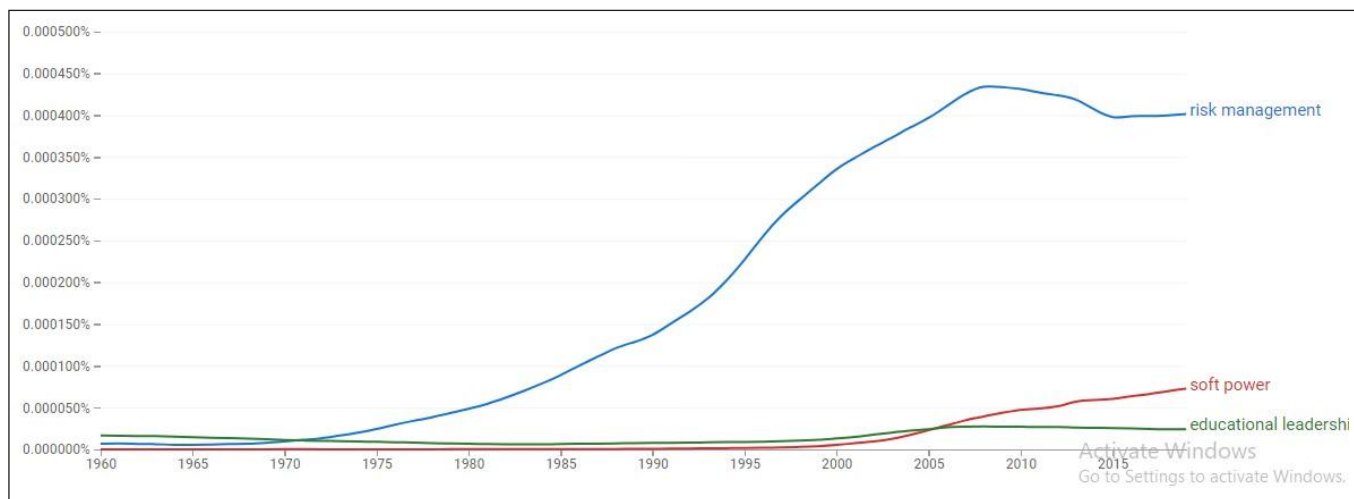
## Soft Power and Risk Management in Educational Leadership

There are two important considerations about the theoretical framework of soft power in educational leadership. First is the relational and contextual nature of soft power, which differs from one country to another. Second is the context of the era of openness in education. Scholars argue that there is a shift away from the preponderance of teacher-centred learning environments, with a transition of power towards the teacher as an authoritarian leader, to more ecosystems models of learning and communication, where academic leaders are servant leaders.

Openness in education opens the door for risk management to think about the future. Traditionally, managers in education investigate risks based on past data. “To address any risk, it is very important to first identify the risk, assess its likely impact, and plan for preventative action now, to minimise the impact of the risk, should risk materialise. Risk assessment requires a mindset with a vision to anticipate the future based on certain key risk indicators of the present which always emanate important information about the expected future” (Kumar, 2021).

Is the research on the area of risk management important for educational leadership theory and practice? Let us analyse the three keywords: risk

management, soft power, and educational leadership in Google Books Ngram Viewer. The result is presented in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1: The Prevalence of Research in Risk Management**

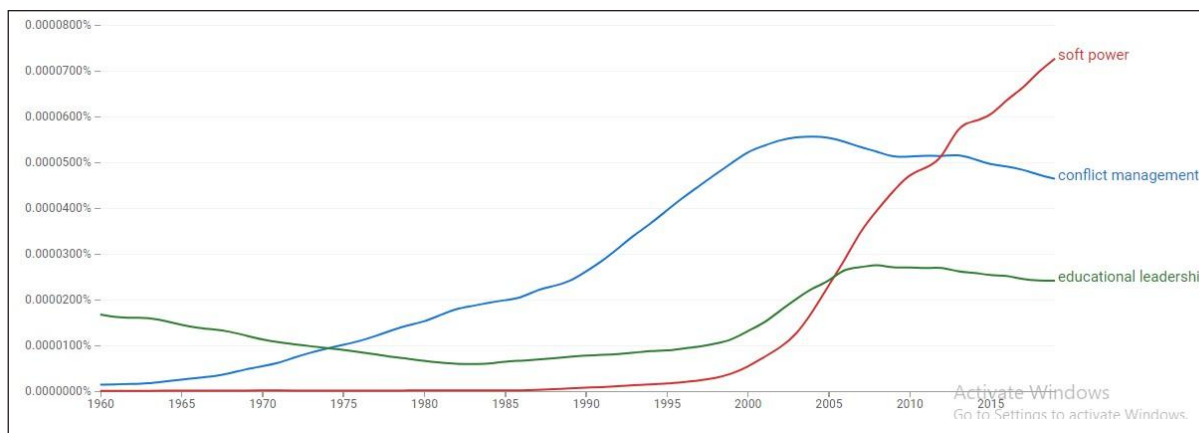
Others go further and question the usefulness of the term due to its vague nature (Xu, 2022). In higher education, for instance, risk management is often associated with the Enterprise Risk Management approach and is related to the development of a portfolio of various risks, formulation of the risk strategy, and optimisation of the risk for creating value (Perera et al., 2022). Gunay and Dulupcu (2022) proposed to use a risk management approach for analysing the performance of higher educational institutions. It was observed that risk management would contribute to understanding the third mission of universities, generally known as “*contribution to society*”, as a more ambiguous concept, in contrast to teaching and research. Therefore, the benefit of risk management in educational leadership is to identify the best models for innovation.

## Soft Power and Conflict Management in Educational Leadership

*“Conflict is an attendant feature of human interaction and cannot be eliminated; however, its proper management*

*and transformation are essential for peace and progress in human society.”* (Ndum & Okey, 2015). The issue of conflict is complex and multi-aspectual. In general, conflict is associated with poverty (Ikejiaku, 2009; Morrow et al., 2022; Vasconcelos et al., 2022). In educational leadership, conflict is associated with intrinsic motivation. As was noted by Haushofer (2013), while the damaging impact of poverty on intrinsic motivation to learn has been well-documented, the impact that poverty plays in ensuring the learning process and educational outcomes in teaching is less understood. Therefore, ensuring that educational management plays an important role in reversing the damaging effects of any type of conflict on learning outcomes requires a deeper analysis of how the educational management model arises conflict.

Is the research on the area of conflict management important for educational leadership theory and practice? Let us analyse the three keywords: conflict management, soft power, and educational leadership in Google Books Ngram Viewer. The result is presented in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2: The Prevalence of Research in Soft Power**

Yet, most scholars eschew the term conflict management in educational leadership in favour of other concepts, like crisis leadership (Virella, 2022; Poulin, 2022). However, although conflict is important for motivation to lead, conflicts are far from the desired manifestation in human society. The crisis can destabilise the educational organisation and each ‘system’ has to work under stress because of unreliable information, situational novelty, unclear and shifting goals, and ill-structured situations. Crisis management is about sense-making, decision-making, and coordination, meaning-making (crisis communication), terminating (‘accounting’ and ending the crisis), and effective learning. Crisis communication is an integral part of crisis management. The term ‘*crisis communication*’ refers to candid and frequent communications with the members of the organisation about the current state of affairs. Therefore, the core responsibility of the educational leaders in times of crisis is to hear the problems and issues, take responsibility, and ensure the well-being of those affected by the crisis.

The most important characteristic of a good leader in education in a period of crisis is emotional intelligence, meaning the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions. Therefore, by sharpening their emotional quotient, leaders would have a more empathetic response to the needs of their employees. In the metasystems interpretation, sense-making is much more than sharing information and identifying patterns; it goes beyond what is happening and what may happen to what can be done about it. What are the leadership competencies required during and after times of crisis? The current age is an ultimate test for leadership across the world.

Any educational organisation has a hierarchical structure. The efficiency of the educational organisation implies power. The most vital source of power refers to the relationship between the principals’ reward power and risk management. Power is due to a professional (leader) position in an educational organisation or it could be personal. For instance, legitimate power or positional power allows the leader to sign an order. Coercive power includes psychological, physical, or emotional force in the form of verbal/written reprimands, disciplinary actions, fines, demotion, and termination of the contract. Reward power refers to the ability of a person to influence others by using financial (e.g. bonuses, pay rises) or non-financial rewards (e.g. praise, job promotion, flexible working hours, recognition). Personal power is the expert power or/and referent power and is related to the proven expertise in a particular domain. The role of experts in an educational organisation is to provide relevant decisions and solutions for real problems.

### Dimensions of Conflict in Leadership and Data-Driven Educational Management

Conflict is inevitable in educational leadership. The problem is that the *motives* of teachers and students are different, and are often incompatible. In data-driven educational management, conflict is associated with data. Thus, in contrast to damage that result directly from the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, conflict has a long-term impact after the event.

The factors of conflict vary from *global factors* (i.e. globalisation, digitalisation, and so on) and *external factors* (i.e. inter-organisational conflict, the interpersonal conflict between teachers and students, intra-group conflict) to *internal factors* (i.e. motivational conflict). In stressful situations, conflicts may be: a) *inter-personal conflict* – the conflict between individual members of an organisation occurring because of differences in their goals and values (i.e. teacher versus teacher, student versus teacher); b) *intra-group conflict* – the conflict within a social group (i.e. a group of teachers versus students) and c) *inter-organisational conflict* – the conflict between two organisations. The potential causes of conflict in data-driven educational management may include poor communication network, overlapping authority, the expected pattern of behaviour in a crisis, and/or the teacher's perception of inequitable treatment in the educational management.

Conflict management style is a joint activity and its effectiveness determines the type of impact of conflict on leadership. One of the tools that aim to analyse conflict management styles is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). This tool measures five ways of dealing with conflict: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Competing style is when we want to achieve our goals and objectives, making quick decisions, but we do not want to cooperate with the other party. Collaborating style is when we and the other party involved in the conflict collaborate to satisfy the goals of both parties. Avoiding style is when we try to avoid the issue that caused a conflict, neither perusing our own objectives nor cooperating with the other party; this is used when the issue is trivial. Accommodating style is when we cooperate with the other person to a high extent and this cooperation might be at our own expense and be against our objectives. Compromising style is when an individual exhibits median levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness for a temporary solution. For all cases, negotiation is recommended.

## Conclusion

The concept of soft power stretches to educational leadership because it includes anything that is not military or economic, but relates to education and culture. However, it is unclear how soft power relates

to material resources, and therefore, to the material and digital intelligence of leaders. This paper was presented to reveal the findings of the literature analysis and Google Books Ngram Viewer that was conducted on the topic of the impact of soft power on the educational leadership theory and practice. A comprehensive literature review was performed to discover specific characteristics of soft power in the era of openness. Based on the findings from the literature review, the conceptual and methodological framework for deeper research in educational leadership, organisation, and management were developed.

Although soft power is not the main priority of educational leadership, the contribution of soft power to both research and practice should not be ignored. Soft power relies upon risk management and conflict management. Both concepts should be investigated deeper to identify how soft power could be used in educational leadership, especially in data-driven educational leadership. Hence, it is possible to deduce that soft power helps leaders improve learning performance. On the other hand, this investigation has some limitations. Due to a lack of data and access to various scientific databases, it is difficult to assess current theoretical investigations and practices to understand the impact of soft power on self-regulated leadership style. Lastly, increasing the weight of the third mission of the educational organisations on society, especially for the global dimension/planetary dimension of the society, might be beneficial in designing programmes for the development of the performance of leaders. Therefore, educational leadership theory should give more attention to soft power for the development of responsible leaders of educational organisations in their country and the world, who are adaptive to social challenges.

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