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# The vice and virtue of conflict in boards: A longitudinal study into the effect of conflicts and cohesion on the task performance of supervisory school boards in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

The increased diversity and autonomy of schools calls for a more professional approach to school governance. In response, attention has been directed to the structure of school boards in the Netherlands. However, previous research indicates that the effectiveness of governance is not so much about structure as it is about behaviour. Conflict, in particular, appears to be an important underexposed factor in the effective behaviour of school boards. In a longitudinal research design, a survey using Likert-scale items was distributed in 2016 and 2017 to executive directors of schools in the Netherlands to gauge their assessment of conflicts within the supervisory school board. Hierarchical regression analyses and moderator analyses were used to test the hypotheses. An increase in task-related conflicts were found to have a clear positive effect on the task performance of supervisory boards. An increase in numbers of relational conflicts had a negative effect on the control task performance, while an increase in process-related conflicts had a negative effect on the advisory task performance. The cohesion within a supervisory board proved to be an important moderator of the effect of task-related conflicts and relationship conflicts on the control task

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performance. The results from this research underline the need for a multidimensional conceptualisation of conflict in supervisory boards. The need for further research on the interaction between cohesion and conflicts is underscored. Boards should make room for substantive debate and even for the inevitable friction and irritation that is sometimes inherent in being effective in managing schools.

#### KEYWORDS

cohesion, conflicts, efficiency, Netherlands, school boards

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, schools have become more diverse, complex and autonomous (Waslander et al., 2016). The transfer of responsibilities from national governments to individual educational institutions is an increasingly important feature of the reform of education governance in various countries (Pont, 2020; Theisens et al., 2016). Traditional governance models thus seem no longer tenable, for educational institutions have become too large and too complex (Heemskerk et al., 2015; Hooge, 2016; Hooge & Honingh, 2014). As in many other areas within the semi-public sector, the governance of educational institutions is therefore modelled after the governance of private companies (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004; McDonald, 2016; Meyer, 2002). In the Netherlands, this resulted in most schools adopting a two-tier design with an executive board, which often consists of only one executive director, and a non-executive or supervisory board.

The assumption behind this process of organising boards or corporations is that a business-like organisation of the governance of public institutions will render these institutions more effective (Meyer, 2002; Wilks, 2007). Whether this assumption is justified remains an open question (Honingh, van Genugten, et al., 2020). Research on non-executive board effectiveness in the field of corporate governance suggests that the effectiveness of a board is not determined by its structure and composition, but rather it is the actual behaviour of the board members as a team (Huse, 2005; Leblanc, 2004; Pye & Pettigrew, 2005; Van Ees et al., 2009). In research on education governance, it is likewise becoming increasingly apparent that the network steering that is required in school governance largely depends on the social dynamics within a school board and therefore the social dynamics in school boards are what determine the effectiveness of school boards (Ford & Ihrke, 2020; Loh et al., 2021; Theisens et al., 2016).

This *behavioural turn* in studies on boards of directors and school boards has yielded insights regarding a number of behavioural indicators of board effectiveness. Research into behavioural determinants of the effectiveness of boards—both in the corporate sector (e.g., Zona, 2016) and at educational institutions (e.g., Heemskerk et al., 2015)—has revealed the importance of apparent factors such as the extent to which board members are willing to invest their time and energy, and the presence and use of diverse knowledge and skills.

However, research on conflict within boards has provided less conclusive findings. While some point to the possible positive effect of differences of opinion and debate within the board (Forbes & Milliken, 1999), most researchers highlight the negative effects of disagreement and quarrel on the effectiveness of the board (Grissom, 2012). A recent meta-analysis of research on this topic revealed that while the efforts, norms and the use of knowledge within a board of directors have a clear effect on the effectiveness of a board, there is a lack of clarity about the impact of conflicts on the effectiveness of boards (Heemskerk, 2019). Even when conflict is conceived as a substantial debate on the issues at hand, as *task-related conflict*, the impact appears to strongly

differ across studies. For instance, the effect of conflicts on a boards' performance in carrying out tasks is sometimes found *not significant* (Zona & Zattoni, 2007), *negative* (Minichilli et al., 2012) or *positive* (Bailey & Peck, 2011). Research on conflicts in boards thus seems to lack a comprehensive insight into the complex workings of conflicts in boards.

An important unresolved question on board behaviour, is therefore how conflicts, cohesion and the performance of boards are interrelated. This study attempts to take a step further by departing from the research done so far on three aspects. First, studies that have been carried out on diversity and conflicts within boards are often limited to the negative effects of conflicts (Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Van Peteghem et al., 2017; Veltrop et al., 2015). According to these studies, the necessary diversification in boards ought not take place at the expense of the harmony in a board. Boards that are *free from conflicts and act as a cohesive group* are in this view seen as optimally functioning boards, characterised by "*superior decision-making*" (Van Peteghem et al., 2017, p. 339). Studies focusing on school boards have likewise been preoccupied with the negative consequences of conflicts (Ford & Ihrke, 2016, 2017; Grissom, 2009, 2012; Land, 2002). These studies commonly recommend to avoid tensions and conflicts (Ford & Ihrke, 2016; Land, 2002). However, in order to be effective in monitoring and advising directors, boards must be able to engage in a robust discussion with different points of view and perspectives, which inevitably leads to a certain amount of tension among board members (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Heemskerk et al., 2017; Mooney et al., 2007; Simons & Peterson, 2000).

Second, research on conflicts in boards, tends to accord insufficient attention to the multi-dimensionality of conflicts. Conflicts, however, differ in nature and thus in effect (Heemskerk, 2020). Recognising these differences in conflict makes it easier to distinguish adverse effects of conflict from potentially beneficial effects. In literature on team effectiveness, there is a consensus on a threefold classification of conflicts as: (1) *task conflicts*, (2) *process conflicts* and (3) *relationship conflicts*. Task conflicts refer to disagreements on the content of the task at hand, process conflicts are disagreements on how tasks should be accomplished, and relationship conflicts are focused on interpersonal incompatibilities resulting in tension, animosity and annoyance among team members (Jehn, 2014).

A third way in which this research departs from previous research on conflicts in boards is its longitudinal research design. Research on behavioural dynamics in supervisory boards is often largely based on singular measurements. This is problematic as one cannot capture motion and dynamics in the behaviour of boards in a momentary snapshot. As a result, the literature currently lacks studies on dynamics over time in supervisory school boards. This is also a problem in the broader literature on team effectiveness, as noted by Kozlowski "[...] *the lack of attention to dynamics means that team process mechanisms are essentially unstudied*" (Kozlowski, 2015, p. 270). The study on which this article reports is unique in that it does not statically assess the level of conflict and effectiveness at a single moment, but rather provides insight into the dynamics in conflict and effectiveness through repeated measurements over time.

## 2 | SUPERVISORY SCHOOL BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

Research on the effectiveness of school boards varies in how it operationalises effectiveness. While some studies measure effectiveness primarily by examining the quality of education, others focus directly on the quality of a school board's task performance (Loh et al., 2021). A well-functioning school board is important for an educational organisation. However, the effectiveness of a school board may not be readily apparent in the performance of the schools they govern—even as there are causal links between the governance of schools and these educational results. A recent systematic literature review on the relationship between educational quality and executive school boards, accordingly, reveals that there is hardly any empirical evidence to support the link between boards and educational quality (Honingh, Ruiters, et al., 2020).

This is even more true for a supervisory school board since it is even more distanced from the day-to-day operations. Intuitively, it is not difficult to see that a supervisory board may excel in its task if the school is not

performing well, and they work together with school leadership towards improvement. And vice versa, schools that perform well in terms of educational quality may have a board that operates at too great a distance, rendering it unable to act responsibly when a crisis occurs. Indeed, there is evidence that the relationship of supervisory boards is inverse: board members who are not part of the school leadership invest less in the quality of their own task performance when the organisation is doing well (Pugliese et al., 2014).

Accordingly, task performance by the supervisory school board is in this study used as a measure of the board's effectiveness (Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Huse, 2005). Forbes and Milliken define board task performance as "the board's ability to perform its control and service task effectively" (Forbes & Milliken, 1999, p. 492). Classifications of board tasks vary in descriptions, numbers and nuances, and how one sees the tasks and roles of a board, strongly depends on one's own theoretical premises. Huse (2005) unified different classifications by approaching board tasks from three different perspectives: the internal, external and strategic focus on the two major board tasks: service and control. This approach appears to be the most common and useful for studying boards, both in corporate as well as in educational organisations (Adams et al., 2010; Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Ford & Ihrke, 2018; Heemskerk, 2020; Heemskerk et al., 2015). The control task of the supervisory board refers to its task to oversee management and act as the employer of the executive directors for school leadership, while the service or advisory task refers to their advising and guiding of the executive directors by virtue of their knowledge, expertise and networks.

## 2.1 | The multidimensionality of conflicts

To adequately manage disagreements and conflicts within a board, it is important to understand when conflicts are detrimental to the effectiveness of the board and when they actually contribute to a better functioning of a board. Recent research on the effect of conflicts on the effectiveness of teams has revealed that conflict is not a monolithic concept (Heemskerk, 2020). Different types of conflict have different effects on the effectiveness of teams in different contexts. The history of the classification of these different dimensions of conflict, as outlined by Jehn (2014), shows a tendency of a threefold distinction between task conflicts, process conflicts and relationship conflicts. Task conflicts are focused on the content of the task to be performed, process conflicts are focused on how tasks should be performed, and relationship conflicts are caused by interpersonal incompatibilities that result in tension, hostility and annoyance among team members (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Figure 1 presents a multidimensional model of conflicts within a supervisory school board. The effects of the different conflict dimensions on the task performance of the supervisory school board in this model are further outlined below in three hypotheses on the main effects.

Task conflicts are considered crucial to improving the quality of board decision-making (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). Two meta-analyses of the research on conflicts in teams, however, provide a complex and nuanced picture of the

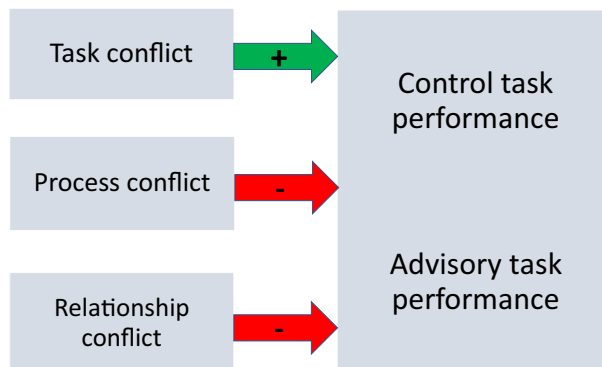


FIGURE 1 Multidimensional model of conflicts in boards. Source: Author.

relationship between conflict and team effectiveness (de Wit et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013). Both analyses identified two important conditions in which task-specific conflicts have a more positive effect on the effectiveness of teams. First, task conflicts tend to be more positive in strategic and complex decision-making than in routine tasks (O'Neill et al., 2013). Second, the effects of task conflicts are less negative or even more positive in teams that function higher up in the hierarchy of the organisation (de Wit et al., 2012). For instance, task conflicts are not productive on the assembly line of a beverage can factory, but they are useful in boards, since boards are mainly concerned with non-routine and complex decision-making at the top of the organisation.

An intriguing study on the downfall of a charter school in Florida paints a picture of how conflict is an important element of adequate school board behaviour. This study showed that a lack of engagement in task-related conflicts within the board appears to have ultimately ruined the school, for the school board “*did not question the principal on many issues regarding the school operations and finances*” (Karaxha, 2013, p. 600) and thus degenerated into a dysfunctional rubber-stamping board. Previous research into the behaviour of supervisory school boards likewise suggests that task conflicts appear to have a positive effect on the task performance of school boards (Heemskerk, 2020; Heemskerk et al., 2015). The effectiveness of supervisory school boards is associated with a comparatively greater number of instances of task conflicts. On this background, the following three hypotheses are articulated. Two additional hypotheses are presented in the next section.

**Hypothesis 1.** An increase in task conflicts leads to an increase in the performance of both the control and advisory tasks.

Process conflicts, on the other hand, generally have a negative effect on the effectiveness of teams, because members of the group are distracted from the execution of their tasks (de Wit et al., 2012; Margarida Passos & Caetano, 2005). Process conflict within a board usually concerns the organisation of the board itself (Who sits on which committee? How do we evaluate ourselves? What does the resignation schedule look like?). Process conflicts distract from the actual work, lead to procrastination and reluctance to participate, and encourage hostility leading to a negative attitude towards the board as a team (Behfar et al., 2011; Jehn, 1997). The negative effect of process conflicts appears to be even more negative in non-routine and complex decision-making, characteristics typical for the context of supervisory school boards (Hamm-Kerwin & Doherty, 2010).

**Hypothesis 2.** An increase in process conflicts leads to a decrease in the performance of both the control and advisory tasks.

Relationship conflicts within a supervisory school board often arise from the incompatibility of personalities resulting in tension, hostility and annoyance among board members. Task and process conflicts, when not adequately handled, may cause and aggravate relationship conflicts, as discussions about who should do what easily degenerate into personal struggles and hostility within the supervisory board (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Greer et al., 2008; Martínez-Moreno et al., 2012; Mooney et al., 2007).

**Hypothesis 3.** An increase in relationship conflicts leads to a decrease in the performance of both the control and advisory tasks.

## 2.2 | Cohesion is a moderating factor

The model presented in Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview with three hypotheses about main effects. The model becomes more complex when the dynamic interaction with cohesion is added as a variable to the model. For a board to be effective in both the control and service task it requires the members to sense

a shared responsibility for monitoring and advising the director. This requires a certain degree of cohesion within the board as a team. Cohesion within a team contributes to the active participation of the members and ensures more effective communication within a team (Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009). The importance of cohesiveness and good relationships in schools and boards for the effectiveness of the decision making and governance of the organisation is often stressed in the literature on school governance (e.g., Hofman & Hofman, 2011).

The cohesion within the supervisory school board is also expected to have a moderating effect on the relationship between conflicts and the task performance of the board (Heemskerk et al., 2015). More cohesive teams seem to be better able to prevent the negative effects of differences of opinion on their task performance (Ensley et al., 2002). In a supervisory school board where cohesion is comparatively great, the negative effects of process and relationship conflicts can be considerably weaker, for greater cohesion shields against hostility and helps to prevent a negative attitude towards the team. Previous research on the moderating effect of cohesion on the impact of conflicts on the performance of boards also suggests a dampening effect of cohesion on the emergence of relationship conflicts in supervisory school boards (Heemskerk, 2020). At the same time, task conflicts may have a more positive effect in boards where the cohesion further increases, as task conflicts prevent the emergence of group think, or excessive unanimity, within supervisory school boards (Forbes & Milliken, 1999; Janis, 1982).

**Hypothesis 4.** The negative impact of process and relationship conflicts on the control and advisory task performance is more pronounced in supervisory school boards where the cohesion within the board has decreased.

**Hypothesis 5.** The positive effect of task conflicts on the control and advisory task performance is more pronounced in supervisory school boards where the cohesion within the board has increased.

### 3 | SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands is exceptional in the extent to which schools are autonomous. Therefore, it provides a good case to further examine the consequences of greater autonomy of education institutions for the governance of schools (Hooge, 2016; OECD, 2013). The Dutch education system has both private and public schools, both of which are fully funded by the government. Education reforms and deregulation since the 1980s led to a further increase in the autonomy and size of both private and public education institutions (Karsten, 1999).

To understand how the governance of schools in the Netherlands is arranged, it helps to briefly explain the history behind its dual education system. This system of public and private education, both funded by the government, is a consequence of the so-called *school struggle* in the Netherlands. The school struggle arose from the competition for power during the nineteenth century between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority, who each wanted to organise their own religious education, and the liberals who advocated a neutral and thus secular public education (Waslander, 2010). This school struggle came to an end when, after almost a century of political strife, the liberals succeeded in attaining suffrage for women and religious groups attained choice in religious education. This state-funded freedom in education is enshrined in the Dutch Constitution; it has been the subject of much debate, but has remained unchanged—even after secularisation in the 1960s.

At first, private and public schools had a different mode of governance and differently structured boards. In many cases, private schools were run through an association with a board composed of parents, local religious leaders or church representatives, while the management of public schools was in the hands of the local public administration, with a board of parents and local dignitaries appointed by the municipal council. In the past decades, however, this has increasingly converged. Many private schools have become detached from their founding association and merged in large foundations, while the management of public schools is almost fully devolved

by local authorities to autonomous foundations. Comparable changes have also occurred in many other OECD countries (Honingh et al., 2020).

In the Netherlands, this has resulted in a move to a two-tier system of governance, whereby in almost all educational institutions, private and public, a supervisory board with non-executive directors oversees the leadership, i.e., the executive director, of individual schools (van Thiel, 2015). This two-tier system is also the common governance system for companies in the Netherlands. The supervisory school board generally consists of five or seven members with different areas of expertise (such as financial, legal and education expertise). These members are recruited by the supervisory school board itself through an open application procedure. The board of executive directors often consists of only one person: the school leader who acts as the chairman of the board of directors, comparable to the chief executive officer (CEO) in the corporate sector (Heemskerk, 2020). Unlike practices seen for example in the United States, supervisory school boards in the Netherlands are not elected democratically and are therefore perceived as less political and largely independent of the government.

The autonomous way in which supervisory school boards are organised in the Netherlands requires boards even more to constantly balance between involvement and distance. The search for this balance and thus the appropriate role for the board often creates some tension between the supervisory school board and the executive director. This balancing act in itself is not unique to the situation in the Netherlands—school boards in other governance contexts are likewise in search of a proper balance in the fulfilment of their roles. Mountford, for instance, suggests in her study on school board to superintendent relationships, in the United States, that conflicts between the superintendent and board members are less a matter of searching for the right role, but mainly of “*thwarted attempts at micromanaging*” the superintendent (Mountford, 2004, p. 736). This kind of tension between boards and executives further underlines the relevance of a better understanding of how conflicts affect the effectiveness of supervisory school boards.

## 4 | METHOD

To test the hypotheses, a survey using Likert-scale items was distributed both in 2016 and 2017 to the executive directors of the approximately five hundred organisations in primary, secondary and vocational education whose school board is a member of the Association of Supervisory Board Members in Educational Organisations and Childcare (VTOI-NVTK). In 2016, 60% of the executive directors responded ( $N = 300$ ) and in 2017, 26% of the directors responded ( $N = 130$ ). At 21% of the educational organisations, the executive director completed the questionnaire in both 2016 and 2017 ( $N = 103$ ). The executive directors were invited to participate by means of a personalised e-mail, which emphasised the anonymous and confidential processing of the data, in order to increase the response rate and to reduce possible common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Supervisory board behaviour and performance was thus gauged by querying the perception of the executive director. The executive director is the director with responsibility of school leadership, this is someone who knows the organisation well and is also in a better position than other board members to make statements about the functioning of the board in general (Minichilli et al., 2012). The executive is also present at almost all supervisory board meetings. Relying on the executive director as the single respondent is common in survey studies on board behaviour in corporate governance research (Huse, 2009). A recent meta-analysis did not find a distorting effect of the use of a single respondent on the findings of the research into the behaviour of boards of directors (Heemskerk, 2019).

Control task performance was measured through six items on the extent to which the supervisory school board actively supervises key issues, such as the financial situation of the organisation, through two items on the employers' role of the board in relation to the executive director. Advisory task performance was measured by questions addressing the extent of advice from the supervisory school board for the same six key issues; and through three items asking to what extent the board members serve the organisation through their networks and act as



sparring partners and advisers to the executive director. Cohesion was gauged by combining relevant items from the Group Cohesion Scale Revised (Treadwell et al., 2001) with items from the Group Environment Questionnaire (Carron et al., 1985), and by adapting them to the context of supervisory school boards. The increase in the control and advisory task performance and the cohesion within the board was calculated by subtracting the 2016 average per organisation from the 2017 average score. Task, process and relationship conflicts were measured by items based on the suggestions of Jehn (1995), Jehn and Mannix (2001) and Sellevoll et al. (2007). The increase in conflict dimensions was calculated by subtracting the 2016 average from the 2017 average.

The analyses were controlled for four factors. First, the size of the educational organisation could have a distorting effect: larger organisations face more complex strategic challenges. The issues of an educational organisation's supervisory school board that oversees only one school is different from the challenges of a board with responsibility for more than 40 schools. The number of schools under a supervisory school board in 2017 was therefore included as a control variable. Second, a new executive director was appointed at a number of organisations between 2016 and 2017. As a respondent, a new director can have a different perspective on the functioning of the school board, so the switch in executive director has been included as a dummy control variable. Likewise, the term of office of the executive board member can have an influence on how they view the task performance of the supervisory school board. Furthermore, a director's long term of office seems to be linked to a certain dominance of the director over the board (Hermalin & Weisbach, 1991). The tenure of the executive director was therefore included as a third control variable in the analyses. The final control variable is the frequency of meetings of the supervisory school board, as it is generally assumed that the frequency of meetings is positively related to the board's task performance (Heemskerk et al., 2015). An overview of all variables can be found in Table 1, Table 2 shows the mean, the number of cases, the standard deviation and the correlations between all variables.

## 5 | RESULTS

Table 1 reveals that the levels of both control and advisory task performance by supervisory school boards have declined in 2017. However, the differences between educational organisations are considerable, as is evident from

TABLE 1 Survey items.

	Number of items	2016		2017		Increase mean <sup>a</sup>
		Mean	Alpha	Mean	Alpha	
Control task performance	8	5.28	.86	5.12	.83	-.20
Advisory task performance	9	4.58	.90	4.37	.91	-.41
Cohesion	6	5.56	.88	5.49	.84	-.12
Number of schools				13.36		
Change of principal				.077		
Tenure of principal	1			6.07		
Frequency of meetings	1	6.00		5.99		-.04
Task conflicts	2	5.53	.83	5.50	.82	-.16
Process conflicts	3	1.87	.70	1.86	.45	.06
Relationship conflicts	4	1.86	.90	1.97	.92	.15

Note: Number of survey items, mean and reliability statistics of the measurements in 2016 and 2017 and the increase between 2016 and 2017.

<sup>a</sup>The increase between 2016 and 2017 has been calculated at the individual level by subtracting the value for 2016 from the value for 2017 for the 103 organisations that were surveyed in both 2016 and 2017.

TABLE 2 Correlation, mean and standard deviation of all variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Increasing control task performance	1									
2. Increasing advisory task performance	.524**	1								
3. Increasing cohesion	.431**	.348**	1							
4. Number of schools	.066	.162	-.002	1						
5. Change of principal	-.090	-.017	-.023	-.102	1					
6. Tenure of principal	-.026	.041	.024	.111	-.372**	1				
7. Frequency of meetings	.091	.086	-.052	.106	-.160	.054	1			
8. Increasing task conflicts	.384**	.349**	.455**	.068	-.056	.084	.024	1		
9. Increasing process conflicts	.005	-.259*	-.246*	-.082	.078	-.024	-.043	-.036	1	
10. Increasing relationship conflicts	-.232*	-.237*	-.486**	-.018	.117	-.051	.018	-.210*	.450**	1
Mean	-.196	-.406	-.119	13.4	.077	6.07	-.039	-.160	.058	.147
Standard deviation	.812	1.12	.851	13.1	.268	4.42	1.14	1.19	.909	1.05
N	103	102	98	103	130	130	103	97	97	97

Source: Author.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

the standard deviations in Table 2. The correlations in Table 2 further support the first three hypotheses, except that, contrary to Hypothesis 2, there does not seem to be a relationship between the increase in process conflicts and the increase in the control task performance of supervisory school boards.

To test the hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed on the dependent variables—the increase in control task performance and the increase in advisory task performance—with three models. Model 0 contains only the control variables: the number of schools within the organisation, executive director turnover, executive director's term of office and the frequency of supervisory school board meetings. Then, in model 1, the three different dimensions of conflicts in the board: task conflicts, process conflicts and relationship conflicts, have been added to the analysis. In model 2, cohesion is added to the analysis. The results of the regression analyses are shown in Table 3.

The control model appears to have little explanatory value for both the control and advisory task performance. The number of schools within the organisation seems to be the only variable associated with the board's advisory task performance. The inclusion of the conflict dimension does, however, lead to a significant increase in the explanatory value for the control task performance ( $R^2 = .14$ ) and the advisory task performance ( $R^2 = .16$ ).

In line with Hypothesis 1, the effect of the increase in task conflicts is significant for both the control and the advisory task performance. For Hypotheses 2 and 3, it is a bit more complicated, since the increase in relationship conflicts only has a limited negative effect ( $\beta_{st} = -.212$ ;  $\alpha < .10$ ) on the control task performance and no effect on the advisory task performance, while the opposite is true for the increase in process conflicts: it has a limited negative effect ( $\beta_{st} = -.195$ ;  $\alpha < .10$ ) on the advisory task performance, but no effect on the control task performance.

It is notable that the inclusion of the increase in cohesion in model 2 does affect the control task performance ( $\beta_{st} = .337$ ;  $\alpha < .01$ ) but does not affect the advisory task performance. Furthermore, this positive effect of the

TABLE 3 Hierarchical regression analysis.

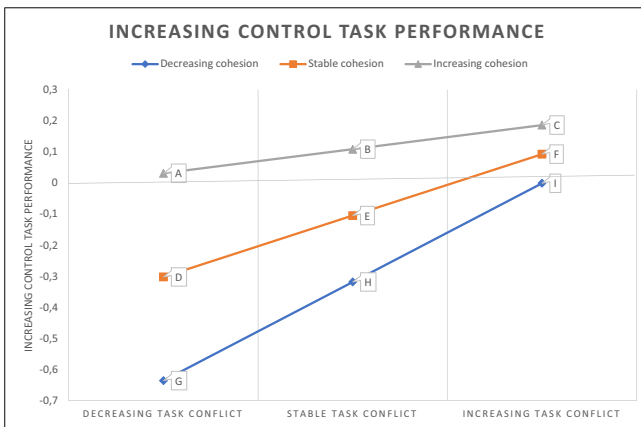
	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
	Increasing control	Increasing advise	Increasing control	Increasing advise	Increasing control	Increasing advise
Number of schools	.065	.187 <sup>†</sup>	.053	.154	.059	.157
Change of principal	-.108	.020	-.084	.052	-.094	.046
Tenure of principal	-.055	.052	-.082	.032	-.074	.036
Frequency of meetings	.091	.108	.096	.100	.111	.108
Increasing task conflict			.340**	.311**	.213*	.241*
Increasing process conflict			.126	-.195 <sup>†</sup>	.149	-.183 <sup>†</sup>
Increasing relationship conflict			-.212 <sup>†</sup>	-.087	-.084	-.016
Increasing cohesion					.337**	.186
Adj.R <sup>2</sup>	-.016	.012	.142	.162	.209	.176

Note: Summary for three models predicting school board control and advisory task performance.

Source: Author.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .1$

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

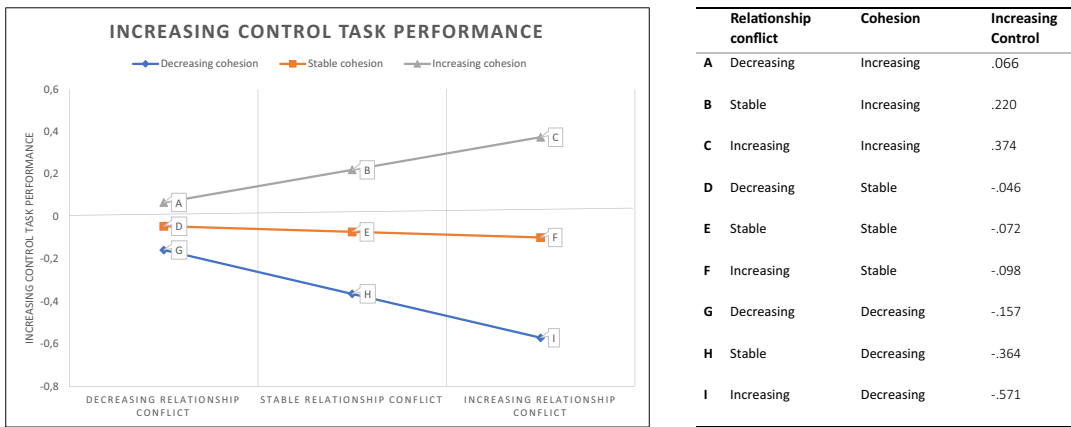


	Task conflict	Cohesion	Increasing Control
A	Decreasing	Increasing	.031
B	Stable	Increasing	.109
C	Increasing	Increasing	.186
D	Decreasing	Stable	-.302
E	Stable	Stable	-.105
F	Increasing	Stable	.093
G	Decreasing	Decreasing	-.635
H	Stable	Decreasing	-.318
I	Increasing	Decreasing	-.001

FIGURE 2 Cohesion, task conflict, and control task performance. Illustration of the moderating impact of cohesion on the effect of task conflict on the increase in control task performance. Source: Author.

increase in cohesion seems to counteract the negative impact of relationship conflicts. Apparently, cohesion here indeed behaves as a moderator on the effect of conflict on the control task performance.

To further test the assumption in Hypotheses 4 and 5, that conflict dimensions behave differently in an environment with increasing or decreasing cohesion, hierarchical regression analyses were performed with the control and advisory task as a dependent variable; and the conflict dimensions and cohesion as independent variables; whereby, in each case, the interaction term of these different conflict dimensions and cohesion was added as an independent variable. These interaction terms were significant for the effect of task conflict and relationship conflict on the control task performance only. Subsequently, through the PROCESS macro version 3.2.01 (Hayes, 2013), data was generated to visualise this moderating effect of both conflict dimensions and cohesion



**FIGURE 3** Cohesion, relationship conflict and control task performance. Illustration of the moderating impact of cohesion on the effect of relationship conflict on the increase in control task performance. *Source:* Author.

on the control task performance of school boards. The charts illustrating these moderating effects are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2 reveals that the interaction effect of task conflict and cohesion is much more pronounced when task conflicts decrease. When task conflicts increase, the difference between decreasing (I), stable (F) and increasing (C) cohesion seems to matter less. However, when task conflicts decrease, the extent to which this is detrimental to the control task performance depends heavily on the cohesion within a supervisory school board. If cohesion increases in the meantime, the interaction effect is almost zero (A), but if cohesion remains the same (D) and especially if cohesion decreases, the effect of a decrease in task conflicts is more pronounced (G). In such a context, a team appears to be almost disintegrating—there is less and less room for differences of opinion and, at the same time, there is less and less mutual cohesion within the board.

It is true that the effect of task conflict is stronger when cohesion in a supervisory school board has increased as well and in this sense the findings are in line with the assumption in Hypothesis 5. Meanwhile, Figure 2 warns boards to be seriously concerned about control task performance, when the cohesion and the task conflict both show a declining trend (G). If board members no longer get along with each other and, to keep the peace, avoid substantive discussions, the board obviously loses its effectiveness as a supervisory body.

At best, a supervisory school board is able to increase both task conflicts and cohesion within the board. Previous research shows that these two can mutually reinforce one another (Heemskerk et al., 2015). If members of a board get on well with each other, a firm debate on the issues at hand will only strengthen their bond.

Interestingly, the interaction with cohesion as a moderator changes the direction of the effect of relationship conflicts, as shown in Figure 3. For supervisory school boards with increasing relationship conflicts, the interaction effect of relationship conflicts and cohesion is the opposite of that for decreasing relationship conflicts. In line with the expectations in Hypothesis 4, relationship conflict is more detrimental to the control task performance of boards when cohesion decreases. Where relationship conflicts decrease, there is not such a profound difference in the contexts of increasing (A), stable (D) or decreasing (G) cohesion. Although in the latter two cases, the control task performance is affected negatively, while in the context of increasing cohesion the decrease in relationship conflicts is associated with an increase in control task performance.

This means that a reduction of relationship conflicts is not necessarily a good sign. Less internal friction and animosity is only beneficial for the control task performance if it is accompanied with an increase in cohesion among board members. Less arguing and at the same time a stable, or worse, decreasing internal cohesiveness seemingly results only in poorer performance by a supervisory school board. The decrease or absence of relationship conflict

is therefore not necessarily linked to an optimal control task performance. This is in line with previous research into boards of directors (Heemskerk et al., 2017) and, as Eisenhardt and others in their research on conflict and effectiveness in management teams have described it: "*the absence of conflict is not harmony, it's apathy*" (Eisenhardt et al., 1997, p. 77).

The interwovenness of cohesion and conflict is also reflected in the pronounced effect that cohesion as a moderator has on the effect of an increase in relationship conflict on the control task performance. More relationship conflict is harmful when the cohesion within a supervisory school board diminishes (I) or remains the same (F), but when the cohesion increases, more relationship conflict actually positively affects the control task performance (C).

This sheds new light on our understanding of the negative effect of relationship conflict on control task performance shown by the regression analyses (Table 3). This also explains in part why this negative effect disappears when cohesion is added to the regression model. A supervisory school board will perform better if it is able to combine an increase in interpersonal conflicts with an increase in cohesiveness within the board.

For example, tensions over investment in a new school building can run high in a supervisory school board and even lead to friction and personal clashes. However, if the board can prevent these tensions from damaging the cohesiveness of the board, and even increase the cohesion within the board, these conflicts will only enhance the supervisory school board's ability to carry out its control task effectively. This is a balancing act since an increase in relational conflicts is negatively related to an increase in cohesion, as can be seen from the correlation in Table 2 (see also Heemskerk, 2020).

However, a supervisory school board where cohesion has increased, to such an extent that the danger of groupthink is imminent, can benefit from the corrective effect of relationship conflicts in order to evade tunnel vision (Janis, 1982). For example, a new board member with a more critical view can cause a lot of irritation and quarrels, while at the same time allowing for sharper discussion of the topics at hand and thus enabling the board to be more effective in the control of their executive director. These results, therefore, do not justify a one-sided advice to solely focus on strengthening the cohesion within a supervisory school board.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

The research on which this article reports responds to a call for the use of longitudinal research designs in the study of behavioural indicators for effectiveness of boards (Heemskerk, 2020; Van Ees et al., 2009). Through repeated measurement of the dynamics of conflict, cohesion and effectiveness, more insight has been gained into how these aspects are interrelated.

While previous research appears to be preoccupied by the negative aspects of conflicts in boards, this study indicates the potential for conflicts to have a positive effect on the effectiveness of supervisory school boards (Ford & Ihrke, 2020; Heemskerk, 2020). An increase in task conflict within a board turns out to be positive for both the advisory and the control task performance, while this does not threaten the cohesiveness within the board. Moreover, the mutual cohesion appears to be strengthened when task conflict intensifies. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the multidimensionality of conflicts in research on conflicts and the effectiveness of boards. It also explains why the findings in previous research may sometimes appear to contradict one another (Ford & Ihrke, 2020).

After all, task conflicts, relationship conflicts and process conflicts have a different effect on task performance (Heemskerk, 2020). While task conflicts have a positive effect on both controlling and advisory task performance, the increase in relationship conflict only has a negative effect on control task performance, while more process conflict leads to a decrease in the advisory task performance.

Growing interpersonal friction is mainly a threat to the sense of shared responsibility for the monitoring of the executive director or school leader. It clearly becomes more difficult to actively supervise, when one can no longer get along so well with one another. A divided supervisory school board is dysfunctional. This appears to be less

relevant for the advisory task performance, as in practice, that task is often carried out less as a collective task but is more based on the individual expertise of the individual board members. Consequently, an increase in process conflict has a negative effect on the advisory task performance. When there is disagreement about who should do what, it gets more difficult to adequately use the individual expertise of the supervisory school board to advise school leadership. However, the effects of both the increase in relationship- and process-conflicts seems limited and further research is needed to confirm and explain this difference in impact.

Remarkably, the effect that an increase in relationship conflicts in supervisory school boards had on the control task performance depended to a great extent on the cohesion within the board. In boards where cohesion is decreasing, more relationship conflict seems to be much more detrimental. Personal battles between members of the board in a context of increasingly less unanimous and unified working practices are apparently devastating for the control task of the board.

At the same time, this is not a recommendation to invest in maximising cohesiveness within the board *per se*, since increasing cohesion might lead to group think, which undermines the positive effect of task conflicts. Group think arises when supervisors feel so deeply involved in the board as a team that, in their pursuit of unity and harmony, they lose the ability to critically examine proposals and discuss alternatives (Hogg & Hains, 1998; Janis, 1982). Increasing cohesion within a team is an important signal for the emergence of group thinking (Park, 2000). This may explain the positive effect of increasing relationship conflicts in the context of increasing cohesion, for the increase in relationship conflicts may signal the ability of supervisory school board members to consider alternatives in the face of an overly cohesive climate—which inevitably causes some irritations.

In their research into the ways in which financial risks were managed during the credit crisis in British firms, McNulty and colleagues (2013) found that a high degree of social cohesion within a board in some cases prevented the positive effect of task conflicts. In contrast, other researchers have identified a positive relationship between cohesion and the effect of task conflicts in boards (Heemskerk et al., 2015; Westphal & Bednar, 2005). The relationship between cohesion, conflicts and the task performance of boards is more complex and perhaps more context-dependent than expected. Forbes and Milliken (1999) may have a point when they suggested an inverse U-shaped relationship between cohesion and the task performance of boards of directors. Further research in different contexts is needed to gain a better understanding of the contextual dynamics and the interaction between cohesion and conflicts.

In this regard, board governance remains a balancing act between an overly cohesive team in which there is no room for disagreement and a constantly tense situation in which the board member's performance is hampered by ongoing interpersonal friction. Supervisory school boards are therefore well-advised not only to invest in maintaining good interpersonal relations within their board, but above all to make room for substantive debate and even for the inevitable friction and irritation that is sometimes inherent in effectively monitoring the executive director.

The study on which this article reports has some limitations. First, the Dutch context is characterised by very autonomous schools and the two-tier design of school governance. Honingh and colleagues (Honingh et al., 2020) have outlined the diversity of school board structures across countries and how this may influence research findings. Future research should therefore explore whether the findings in this study are generalisable to other governance contexts with differently constituted (supervisory) school boards. Second, in this study the executive director, or school leader, was represented by a single respondent. Although a recent meta-analysis found no distorting effect of relying on a single respondent in research on school boards (Heemskerk, 2019), future research would benefit from surveying supervisory board members to further triangulate responses from executive directors. Also, observation-based research would greatly enhance this field of research, but remains limited (see for an example Heemskerk et al., 2017). Finally, the research on which this article reports was limited to a two-year time frame. Future research could expand a longitudinal study on boards over several years, to better understand the robustness of the relationship between conflict, cohesion, and effectiveness in supervisory boards.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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