

Leading through Silence

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Abstract

This article examines the notion of “quiet leadership” in education, highlighting the role and dynamics of quiet leaders within a field traditionally associated with charismatic and extroverted leadership styles. Drawing on a review of international and Greek literature, it presents the theoretical foundations of quiet leadership and its core characteristics, such as active listening, discreet guidance, the cultivation of trust, and the strengthening of community. Particular emphasis is placed on the advantages of this approach in educational practice—namely, creating psychological safety, empowering students and teachers, and promoting collaborative cultures. At the same time, the article analyzes limitations and challenges, including the potential misinterpretation of silence as weakness, the need for decisiveness at critical moments, and the constraints of the institutional framework of education. Finally, it proposes practical applications for both school leaders and teachers, as well as directions for future professional development and research. Quiet leadership is not a sign of passivity but a conscious strategy that prioritizes the collective, empathy, and the cultivation of learning communities. As such, it emerges as a necessary and timely leadership model for 21st-century schools.

Keywords

Quiet Leadership, Educational Leadership, School Administration,
Collaboration, Empathy

1. Introduction

The study of leadership has consistently been a central focus of inquiry within the social and educational sciences. In the classical view, the image of the leader is closely linked to extroversion, charismatic presence, and the capacity to inspire through speech, persuasion, and dynamism. In education in particular, the exemplary principal or the highly respected teacher is often portrayed as a figure with a strong public profile, capable of mobilizing and guiding others through impres-

sive interventions. However, recent research on leadership tends to revise these traditional models, emphasizing forms of leadership that do not rely on forceful rhetoric or external imposition, but on calm, discreet, and inwardly oriented guidance (Sergiovanni, 1992; Fullan, 2001).

In this light, the concept of “quiet leadership” addresses a gap by proposing a leadership orientation that emphasizes silence, empathy and relational influence, rather than overt charisma or rhetorical dominance (Rock, 2006). Quiet leadership can be defined as a mode of guiding an educational community in which influence is exercised through attentive presence, reflective listening, and strategic restraint, rather than through overt authority or rhetoric.

To contrast briefly with other leadership paradigms: transformational leadership typically focuses on articulation of a compelling vision and inspiring followers to transcend self-interest (Bass, 1990); servant leadership places the leader in the role of a supporter who prioritizes the needs of others (Greenleaf, 1977); distributed leadership emphasizes shared responsibility and lateral influence across stakeholders (Spillane, 2006). Some comparative studies suggest that quieter leadership styles may foster deeper relational trust in contexts where transformational or charismatic styles could overshadow collaboration (e.g. in contexts of change, quieter voices may reduce backlash).

The aim of this article is to explore the power of “quiet” leaders in education by examining, first, the theoretical framework from which the concept of quiet leadership emerges and, second, its practical applications in the school environment. It seeks to show how silence can become a means of influence and empowerment, what the advantages and limitations of this approach are, and how it can be incorporated into the professional development of educational leaders.

2. Theoretical Framework of Educational Leadership

Educational leadership has been intensively studied in recent decades because it is directly linked to school quality, instructional effectiveness, and student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). A core assumption in the international literature is that leadership is not synonymous with administration or management; rather, it is a dynamic process of influence and inspiration aimed at creating a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement of educational practice (Bush, 2011).

One of the most influential approaches has been transformational leadership. Burns (1978) first introduced the concept, which Bass (1990) subsequently developed extensively. The transformational leader is described as one who articulates a compelling vision, mobilizes members of the community to transcend personal interests in favor of common goals, and simultaneously supports their personal growth. In the school context, transformational leadership translates into a principal’s ability to foster trust, set high expectations, and empower teachers through recognition and support (Hallinger, 2003).

Another impactful model is servant leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (1977).

Unlike traditional models that stress authority and control, servant leadership emphasizes the leader's role as a "servant" of others' needs. The leader acts as a supporter, empowers others, and emphasizes the human dimension of relationships. In schools, servant leadership is associated with cultivating an environment of mutual support in which teachers feel they have a voice and room to express themselves (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Within this landscape emerges the concept of "quiet leadership", proposed by Rock (2006). The quiet leader does not seek visibility or imposition but exerts influence through listening, reflectiveness, and discreet interventions. Their power lies not in eloquence but in the capacity to make space for others, cultivate trusting relationships, and bring out a team's potential. Silence, in this context, is not passivity but a deliberate strategic choice aimed at maintaining balance and facilitating participation.

This concept aligns closely with the theory of emotional intelligence as developed by Goleman (1995). Leaders with high emotional intelligence can understand and regulate their own emotions, show empathy, and build healthy relationships. In educational practice, this translates into principals' or teachers' ability to handle conflict calmly, provide emotional support to community members, and create a climate of safety and acceptance (Day & Leithwood, 2007).

Quiet leadership does not negate other leadership forms; it often operates complementarily. A principal, for example, may combine elements of transformational leadership—articulating vision and setting goals—with quiet leadership—promoting collaboration and collective decision-making without monopolizing the floor. This dynamic highlights the multidimensional nature of educational leadership, which cannot be reduced to one-dimensional models.

The value of quiet leadership becomes especially salient in complex, rapidly changing environments such as schools. Fullan (2001) emphasizes that educational organizations need leaders who can manage uncertainty, cultivate relationships, and support the collective. In such settings, silence and discretion can be sources of strength, as they create space for many voices rather than amplifying the prominence of a single one.

3. Characteristics of the Quiet School Leader

Quiet leadership is not synonymous with inaction or a lack of initiative; it represents a different mode of presence and influence. The quiet leader operates with inner steadiness and a conscious decision to guide the community through the power of silence, empathy, and consistency. In education—where relationships among students, teachers, families, and administration are decisive for the quality of the educational experience—these characteristics are particularly valuable.

A fundamental trait is active listening. Listening is not a passive reception of others' words but an active process of understanding, empathy, and recognition of needs and emotions. Covey (2004) stressed that "listening with the intent to understand rather than to reply" is among the most important habits of an effec-

tive leader. In schools, a principal who carefully attends to teachers' concerns or a teacher who makes room for students' voices fosters trust. Active listening signals that every member has value and that their contribution is acknowledged, thereby strengthening participation and belonging. This practice extends to students: recent research by [Holquist et al. \(2023\)](#) shows that recognizing and integrating "student voice" is directly connected to forms of distributed and quiet leadership, where influence stems not from the authority of one but from the community's collective.

Equally important is discreet guidance. In contrast to leadership that relies on edict or strict hierarchy, the quiet leader favors small, targeted interventions that encourage initiative and autonomy. This does not mean an absence of direction but a supportive, empowering approach. In practice, a principal might encourage a teacher to pilot an innovative instructional strategy without prescribing a fixed method; a teacher might guide students through questions that help them discover solutions. [Rock \(2006\)](#) underscores that such a stance heightens personal responsibility and self-efficacy—key elements for building a learning culture.

A third characteristic is demonstrating ethical conduct and consistency. In educational communities, actions often carry more weight than words. A leader who acts with integrity, honors commitments, and shows respect—even under strain—earns trust. [Sergiovanni \(1992\)](#) speaks of "moral leadership", which does not rely on managerial technique but draws authority from ethical consistency and example. A principal who stands with staff in times of crisis or a teacher who is fair and consistent with all students embodies this moral dimension of quiet leadership.

Providing space for others to grow is perhaps the quiet leader's most distinctive hallmark. Rather than occupying center stage, the quiet leader consciously steps back to enable others to express themselves, take initiative, and develop. [Fullan \(2001\)](#) contends that educational change is sustainable only when all members participate actively. In this context, the quiet leader sets conditions for collective learning by encouraging collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility. For instance, a principal may structure staff meetings around dialogue and idea exchange rather than top-down directives, while a teacher may design lessons that promote student collaboration and peer responsibilities.

In schools, quiet leaders also demonstrate self-regulation and composure. Conflict, pressure, and demands are inevitable. Leaders who respond calmly, avoid escalation, and choose mediation over confrontation help sustain a healthy climate. This approach is closely linked to emotional intelligence, as it presupposes awareness of feelings and control over reactions ([Goleman, 1995](#)). Such capacity is critical in crises, ensuring decisions are made judiciously rather than under the sway of strong emotions.

Finally, quiet leaders are reflective. Silence is not the absence of speech but time for thought, analysis, and understanding. Quiet leaders do not rush to answer; they consider variables, weigh consequences, and listen to multiple voices before deciding. In education, where decisions affect people, relationships, and learning

trajectories, this stance is vital. [Leithwood et al. \(2004\)](#) note that the most effective educational leaders act reflectively, cultivating a culture of learning and adaptation.

Taken together, the traits of the quiet school leader compose a leadership profile focused not on external display but on building deep, authentic relationships. Active listening, discreet guidance, ethical consistency, encouragement of collective participation, composure, and reflectiveness form the core of this approach. Leadership thus takes on a different character: it is no longer the voice of one that directs, but the voice of many that emerges through the leader's silence.

4. Advantages of Quiet Leadership in Educational Practice

Applying quiet leadership in education yields significant benefits that extend beyond day-to-day operations to the long-term cultivation of a healthy, collaborative school culture. Contrary to traditional assumptions equating leadership effectiveness with imposition, overt dynamism, or frequent public performance, quiet leadership draws its strength from consistency, listening, and discreet support. The advantages span interpersonal relations and the quality of education itself.

First is the cultivation of trust. Trust is foundational to effective educational leadership because it enables community members to function without fear or insecurity. [Bryk & Schneider \(2002\)](#) emphasize that “relational trust” in schools is a critical factor for improving teaching and learning. Quiet leaders build trust not through grand declarations or highly visible acts but through alignment of words and deeds, steadiness of choices, and reliable support. For example, when a principal shows genuine concern for teachers' problems and responds with concrete, even low-key actions, trust grows meaningfully.

Closely related is the strengthening of collaboration. Quiet leadership gives space and voice to community members, cultivating a sense that everyone meaningfully contributes to decision-making and the shaping of school life. [Fullan \(2001\)](#) argues that sustainable educational change is possible only when teachers participate actively rather than serving merely as recipients of orders. Leadership that maintains silence to make room for others empowers participation and creates a collaborative culture. A principal who prefers to listen to faculty proposals and incorporate them into decisions fosters shared responsibility. Similarly, a teacher who invites students to express ideas and take initiative strengthens a culture of collaboration in the classroom.

Quiet leadership is also associated with reduced conflict and a calmer school climate. Where authority is exercised through strictness and imposition, conflict is more frequent because members may feel constrained or undervalued. In contrast, a quiet leader's measured stance discourages escalation. As [Goleman \(1995\)](#) notes, managing emotions and demonstrating empathy contribute to a positive climate. The quiet leader prefers dialogue, mediation, and the search for mutually acceptable solutions. In practice, a principal who listens carefully to both sides of a dispute among staff, or a teacher who gives students space to articulate differ-

ences without immediately imposing penalties, reduces the recurrence of conflict and strengthens the sense of fairness.

Another crucial advantage is the empowerment of students and teachers. Leaders who do not monopolize voice or initiative create room for others to develop and express creativity. Day et al. (2009) emphasize that effective leadership in education is linked to building teachers' self-confidence and professional identity. By recognizing and encouraging each member's potential, quiet leadership creates conditions for personal and collective growth. A principal might, for instance, entrust a teacher with coordinating a program—signaling confidence in their abilities. Likewise, a teacher might grant students responsibility for a group project, giving them opportunities to develop as agentic, responsible individuals.

Quiet leadership also supports the long-term sustainability of change. Top-down reforms without genuine participation tend to be short-lived and often meet resistance (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). In contrast, leadership that promotes participation and a sense of ownership leads to lasting change. Precisely because quiet leaders avoid imposition and strengthen collective participation, they create conditions for sustainable improvement.

Finally, the psychological benefits are notable. In schools where leaders convey calm and stability, teachers and students feel safer. The sense that one can voice concerns without fear of criticism or immediate punishment enhances well-being. Edmondson (1999)'s theory of psychological safety underscores the importance of environments where members feel safe to speak, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences. Quiet leadership aligns directly with this approach. Contemporary studies further suggest that a quiet, reflective stance is particularly effective in times of crisis, as leaders acting with restraint and empathy enhance organizational resilience (Sum, 2024). Notably, women leaders often employ forms of "quiet leadership" in managing crises, underscoring its importance across social and cultural contexts.

Moreover, recent empirical studies have begun to provide measurable links between quiet leadership and outcomes. For example, Ergen et al. (2025) examines the relationship between perceived leadership style and teacher turnover intentions, finding that greater alignment with quiet leadership traits correlates with lower turnover—a key indicator of teacher retention and organizational stability (Ergen et al., 2025). Similarly, Kadhim (2024) finds that among teachers, perceptions of quiet leadership are positively associated with higher organizational justice and job satisfaction, which align with improved motivation and commitment (Kadhim, 2024).

To connect leadership traits to student outcomes, one can consider that quiet leadership's relational base contributes to improved student indicators. For instance, creating environments of psychological safety and trust may lead to increased student engagement, decreased absenteeism, and enhanced socioemotional wellbeing. In such settings, students feel safe to voice concerns, take intellectual risks, and collaborate, which research suggests is correlated with higher

achievement and wellbeing (e.g. see studies on psychological safety and learning). Though the direct empirical linkage is nascent, the theoretical logic supports that quiet leadership helps establish the relational and emotional groundwork necessary for improved student performance, engagement, and wellbeing.

In sum, the advantages of quiet leadership in educational practice are multiple and touch the core of school life—from cultivating trust and collaboration to reducing conflict, empowering students and teachers, and advancing sustainable change. Its value lies in its grounding in authenticity, consistency, and a prioritization of the many over the one. In an educational environment that increasingly demands collaboration, adaptability, and empathy, quiet leadership emerges not as weakness but as a profound form of strength.

5. Challenges and Limitations of Quiet Leadership

Despite its many advantages, quiet leadership in education also entails challenges and limitations. Its divergence from dominant leadership stereotypes can invite misinterpretation, while the demands of school reality impose boundaries on its application. Understanding these constraints is essential for employing quiet leadership creatively and realistically.

A key challenge is the misreading of silence as weakness. In societies and professional contexts where stereotypes of the dynamic, extroverted leader prevail, the absence of imposition and a low-key presence can be seen as indecisiveness or lack of capacity. Bass (1990) already noted that the leader's image is tied to inspiring through speech and action; within this frame, the quiet leader risks being misunderstood. In practice, a principal who leaves room for faculty deliberation may be judged "passive" or "weak", even if the choice is deliberately participatory. The challenge grows in light of recent research highlighting high levels of stress and burnout among school leaders. Persson et al. (2025) emphasize that many principals struggle to seek help, fearing it will be seen as a sign of weakness. In this context, quiet leadership may be even more easily misconstrued, as a low-key presence can be equated with detachment or lack of authority.

Related is the need for decisiveness in critical moments. While listening and discretion are valuable, some situations demand swift, clear, and sometimes firm decisions—e.g., incidents of school violence, serious student conflicts, or matters affecting community safety. Vanlommel et al. (2025) highlight that in moments of disruptive change, leaders must adopt emotional and relational practices to maintain trust and coherence in the school community. In such cases, quiet leaders must balance empathy with decisiveness. Leithwood et al. (2004) note that effective leadership requires flexibility and situational responsiveness. Excessive hesitancy risks eroding credibility.

Another limitation concerns balancing silence with action. Quiet leadership rests on discretion and avoiding immediate imposition; however, if silence is prolonged or slides into inaction, it can create a sense of absent leadership. Sergiovanni (1992) underscores that leaders must be present not only as ethical exem-

plars but also as active agents of change. In schools, this means listening is not enough: leaders must set clear directions, take stands on policy issues, and assume responsibility for final decisions.

A further challenge is cultural and organizational. In systems characterized by bureaucracy and hierarchy—as is often the case in Greek education—quiet leadership may be difficult to implement. Institutions and procedures may require principals to decide promptly and ensure compliance. In such contexts, an overly gentle stance may be seen as failure to meet systemic expectations. [Bush \(2011\)](#) notes that educational leadership cannot be detached from the institutional and cultural environment in which it develops. Moreover, cross-cultural evidence suggests that leaders must adapt their styles in response to cultural norms: [Ouyang et al. \(2025\)](#) show that in societies with high power-distance norms, more directive behaviour is expected, making purely quiet approaches harder to sustain without misinterpretation. ([Ouyang et al., 2025](#)) Likewise, comparative literature on culturally responsive leadership underscores that leadership strategies must accommodate cultural diversity ([Uy et al., 2024](#); [Khalifa, 2024](#); [Chaaban, 2025](#)).

The personal toll on leaders must also be acknowledged. Continuous listening, empathy, and discreet support require high levels of emotional endurance and self-regulation. While [Goleman \(1995\)](#) highlights emotional intelligence as crucial to leadership, it can become a source of psychological fatigue without balance. Quiet leaders may shoulder the burden of silent mediation and face heightened stress, especially if their stance is unrecognized or undervalued.

Finally, there is the issue of visibility. Even when practiced quietly, leadership must be recognizable. Teachers and students need to know that someone is guiding, however discreetly. If the leader's presence is too invisible, perceptions of neglect or lack of direction may arise. [Hargreaves & Fink \(2006\)](#) argue that sustainable leadership requires balancing discretion with visibility to ensure both participation and clarity of goals.

In short, the main challenges and limitations of quiet leadership include the risk of misinterpretation as weakness, the need for decisiveness in crises, the balance between silence and action, cultural and institutional constraints, the emotional burden on leaders, and the question of visibility. Recognizing these factors is essential for developing a more complete and realistic strategy for applying quiet leadership in education—not only acknowledging its benefits but also understanding its boundaries and seeking ways to address them through flexibility, blended approaches, and continuous reflection.

6. Applications of Quiet Leadership in Practice

Any leadership model proves its value in practice—through its enactment in schools and its effects on relationships, processes, and learning outcomes. Although quiet leadership may initially seem abstract or hard to discern, it can take concrete forms in the stance and practices of both principals and teachers. These applications go beyond isolated behaviors and constitute an overall culture of

guidance focused on participation, collaboration, and psychological safety.

A characteristic application concerns the principal as a quiet leader. The principal's role is inherently multifaceted—administration, staff coordination, parent communication, and instructional oversight. Here, quiet leadership manifests in practices such as creating structured spaces for dialogue. For example, a principal may institute regular staff meetings in which they do not dominate, instead inviting teachers to bring forward proposals, concerns, and effective practices. This approach aligns with distributed leadership, where authority and responsibility are shared across the community (Spillane, 2006). Rather than being the sole source of direction, the principal acts as a facilitator who elevates the collective voice.

Principals as quiet leaders can also employ mentoring and coaching with teachers. Guidance occurs not via rigid directives but through support, feedback, and dialogue. Research shows that teachers who receive such empowerment develop greater professional confidence and satisfaction (Day et al., 2009). By listening and offering support, principals enhance both teachers' performance and their sense of belonging to a learning community. Of interest, Kadhim (2024) finds that teachers perceive leaders who adopt a quiet stance as more just and trustworthy. The sense of organizational justice fostered by quiet leadership strengthens professional commitment and trust in administration.

Teachers, too, act as quiet leaders in everyday pedagogy. The classroom is a microcosm of society in which the teacher holds a leadership role. The quiet teacher does not impose knowledge with strictness but guides students to discover it and to assume an active role in learning. Rather than providing ready-made answers, they pose questions that cultivate critical thinking and reflection. This stance aligns with constructivist pedagogy, emphasizing agency and participatory learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Teachers also cultivate a culture of collaboration in the classroom. Through group work, circle discussions, and activities that promote interaction, they nurture the sense that learning is a collective good. By making room for students to take initiative, coordinate activities, or assume responsibility roles, teachers practice quiet leadership that prioritizes student empowerment over personal display.

At the school culture level, quiet leadership can take the form of practices that foster empowerment and participation. One such practice is “listening circles”, where community members (teachers, students, parents) gather in an egalitarian setting to share experiences and ideas. Inspired by dialogic learning models (Freire, 1970), these circles help build a culture of dialogue and mutual respect.

Another application is mentoring programs among teachers, where experienced educators guide newer colleagues through shared experience and collaborative reflective practice rather than imposition. Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) argue that such relationships build “professional capital” in schools—enhancing teachers' skills, commitment, and collaboration.

Quiet leadership can also be expressed by cultivating a culture that recognizes

small successes. Principals or teachers who notice and highlight even minor progress among students or staff strengthen confidence and motivation. In contrast to grand celebrations, discreet recognition often has greater impact because it is perceived as authentic and sincere.

To provide a concrete example: In a middle school in a multicultural urban area, the principal instituted monthly “listening rounds” in which small groups of 3 - 4 teachers, students, or parents met informally with the principal in a circular seating arrangement. The principal would only ask open-ended questions and mostly listen—not lecture. Over a year, teacher surveys reported increased trust scores (by 12%), fewer staff conflicts, and an observed rise in teacher-led initiatives (new clubs, peer observation groups). The principal also encouraged a teacher to lead a student-led “peer mentoring” system, granting autonomy while offering gentle, behind-the-scenes guidance. This example illustrates how quiet leadership can be operationalized in everyday school life.

Quiet leadership also applies in professional development. Leadership development programs can include modules on active listening, emotional regulation, and reflective practices. Instead of emphasizing only technical or strategic skills, training can integrate opportunities for silence, peer coaching, and journaling—helping future leaders to cultivate the inner habits of quiet leadership. As [Day & Leithwood \(2007\)](#) note, development that combines cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions is more likely to yield leaders with well-rounded character.

Overall, the applications of quiet leadership in practice reveal the dynamism of a model that does not remain at the level of theory but translates into concrete stances and practices. From the principal who coordinates discreetly to the teacher who gives students room to co-create learning, quiet leadership emphasizes collective responsibility, trust, and participation—transforming silence from absence or weakness into an active, deliberate leadership choice.

7. Limitations of This Review

Because this article is a narrative review, rather than a systematic or meta-analytic study, its scope is inevitably shaped by selection of sources, subjective interpretation, and potential omission of dissenting literature. The absence of explicit inclusion criteria or search protocol may introduce selection bias—some relevant empirical studies could have been inadvertently excluded. Moreover, while efforts were made to include both international and Greek perspectives, publication and linguistic biases may limit the representativeness of the coverage. Hence, the conclusions drawn should be viewed as a conceptual synthesis rather than definitive empirical generalizations.

8. Conclusion and Prospect

The study of quiet leadership in education reveals an approach that transcends traditional stereotypes of dynamic, extroverted leaders. Instead of relying on imposition, rhetorical prowess, or a strong public presence, quiet leadership draws

its strength from consistency, empathy, and the capacity to make space for others' voices. In schools—where relationships are at the heart of the educational process—these features are especially significant.

The analysis above shows that quiet leadership contributes substantially to cultivating trust, enhancing collaboration, reducing conflict, and empowering students and teachers. Its strength lies in de-centering the leader and centering the collective, thereby creating a framework of psychological safety. Practices such as listening circles, mentoring, and highlighting small successes demonstrate how silence can function as an active tool of pedagogical and administrative guidance.

At the same time, challenges accompany this approach: the risk of silence being misread as weakness, the need for decisiveness at critical moments, cultural and institutional constraints, and the psychological burden leaders may bear. For quiet leadership to be effective, it must be combined with flexibility, visible presence, and the capacity for timely decision-making.

Looking ahead, recognizing and institutionally supporting quiet leadership is crucial. The professional development of educational leaders should include not only administrative and management skills but also training in empathy, active listening, and emotion regulation. As Fullan (2001) reminds us, educational change is not the product of isolated actions but of culture building. Quiet leadership can serve as a foundation for such a culture by creating conditions for participation, trust, and sustainability.

Further research should explore how quiet leadership is enacted in Greek schools. While international literature is growing, studies in Greece remain limited. Case analyses of principals and teachers who practice quiet leadership could illuminate distinctive features and challenges within the Greek institutional framework.

In an era when education must navigate complex challenges—from multiculturalism and social inequality to rapid technological change—schools need leaders who can inspire not only with words but also with their silence. Quiet leadership is not passivity; it is a deliberate choice to prioritize the collective over ego, collaboration over imposition, and empathy over rigid hierarchy.

In conclusion, “leadership through silence” is not merely an alternative—it is a deep necessity for 21st-century schools. The challenge lies in recognizing it, embedding it in practice, and creating conditions that give “quiet” leaders the space and support they need. Only then can education cultivate students and teachers with empathy, responsibility, and a sense of community—the very values our society needs now more than ever.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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