



SCHOOL TEACHERS' VIEWS TOWARDS THE EFFECTS OF A CRISIS ON CONFLICTS: THE CASE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The investigation of conflicts and their management in primary school units emerges as extremely important, given that the educational process must be conducted within a positive working environment. This paper examines the phenomenon of conflict in primary schools at a time of crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. This is for the reason that the above period is likely to have reshaped the relationships of cooperation and, by extension, the number, intensity and impact of the inevitable conflicts in social organizations such as schools. According to the research results, the school conflicts were found to concern existing issues prior to the pandemic and to a lesser extent reflected problems that arose as a result of health protection measures against the new coronavirus, the extensive use of ICT, distance teaching and the new conditions of organization and operation to which schools had to adapt. Also, they contributed decisively to the tackling of issues that emerged regarding the operation of the school as a consequence of the new health and social conditions. This finding demonstrates to school management that the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, just like any other crisis, in fact, takes on both negative and positive qualities.

Keywords: school conflicts, conflicts resolution, crisis management, COVID-19 pandemic, school management

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1. Introduction

The operation of a school, being a system, depends to a large extent on the smooth cooperation/communication of the components that make up its internal environment. From all these components (logistical infrastructure, regulatory framework, etc.), particular value is attributed to its human resources (Davis & Fowler, 2020; OECD, 2019) - the differentiating factor in a school unit that contributes decisively to the optimal provision of teaching/learning (Li & Ruppap, 2021; Marzano, 2012; Papadatou & Alexopoulos & 2019).

The reality in schools - as in any other community - is that cooperation, although necessary, is not guaranteed, nor is it easy to achieve since conflicts are a common occurrence (Iordanides et al., 2014; Madalina, 2016; Papageorgaki & Papageorgakis, 2020; Robbins & Judge, 2019). This is because (a) the school is a place of work where people with different roles (educational, advisory, administrative, supplementary) as well as diverse academic & ideological backgrounds, value systems and aspirations coexist, interdepend and interact (Agolli, 2015; Msila, 2012), (b) its available resources are too limited to meet the goals of all its members, (c) the organizational relations and the institutional operating framework are not always clear on issues such as the delegation of power/responsibilities, the allocation of duties, etc. and (d) as open systems, schools interact with their wider external surroundings - a fact that often leads to tensions (Saiti, 2014; Saitis & Saiti, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a critical health event, coming from the external environment of the school unit. In addition to changes in the teaching/learning and pedagogical functioning of schools such as online, e-learning and flexible learning or mass open online courses (MOOCs) (Barron Rodriguez et al, 2020; Koutromanos & Mikropoulos, 2021; Stracke & Trisolini, 2021), this crisis has caused great distress in the relationships of school community members. In social organizations such as schools, social distancing measures and inconsistent information about the spread and degree of danger the new coronavirus poses have been cited as the main reasons responsible for this turmoil (see Melki et al., 2020; Romer & Jemieson, 2020). As a consequence, many people, especially those with reduced mental resilience (see Jakovlevic, 2018), have suffered from symptoms and disorders in their emotional and psychological health, such as anxiety, anger and insomnia, while their social life has been disrupted both inside and outside the school unit (Brooks et al., 2020; Sheridan et al., 2020).

Research to date on the psycho-emotional upheaval caused by the recent pandemic crisis in school life indicates the following: the disruption of face-to-face teaching in schools and the promotion of distance/electronic teaching have had a positive effect and strengthened the level of cooperation among the educational community members in some cases (Delcker & Ifenthaler, 2021; Lien et al, 2022) but, on the other hand, factors that may cause tensions have also been aggravated. For example, it has increased teachers' levels of professional stress (Collie, 2021; Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021), their professional exhaustion and cynicism and has also made

them feel less effective, more insecure and wary of change (Pressley, 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021, Sokal et al., 2020).

In addition, the issue of conflict management has been brought to the surface by research results from the wider field of social organizations (Cora, 2020; Chon et al., 2021; Mihaylova, 2020, 2021; Nadjafova, 2021). More specifically, relevant surveys have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic the number of conflicts between staff members on the one hand was limited due to the physical distancing of employees and remote work, but on the other hand, their texture and content changed. For example, new types of conflict emerged when some workers showed reluctance to strictly adhere to the health protection measures imposed by governments in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus (Kniffin et al., 2021) or when they experienced tension caused by both their work and family obligations all at once (Blasko, 2020).

From the above, it could be maintained that the period of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have reshaped the relationships of cooperation and, by extension, the number, intensity and impact of the inevitable conflicts in social organizations such as schools (see Alves et al., 2022; Klonek et al., 2021). For this reason, the investigation of conflicts and their management in primary school units during the COVID-19 pandemic emerges as extremely important, given that the educational process must be conducted within a positive working environment (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Evans & Yuan, 2018; OECD, 2009), whether in the physical space of schools or in an e-learning collaborative environment, the presence of which is expected to grow (Baldwin-Clark, 2021; Lee, 2021). The purpose of this research is to investigate the views of teachers regarding the phenomenon of conflicts in primary school units in Greece. For an extensive investigation of the research purpose, the following research objectives were set:

- To examine the views of teachers on the frequency and causes of conflicts within the school environment during the COVID-19 pandemic
- To identify the persons who primarily contributed to the management of conflicts during the above period
- To assess the impact of the health crisis on conflicts in the school environment
- To identify the factors that could contribute to better conflict management under exceptional circumstances
- To consider the effect of the demographic characteristics of the sample
- To submit recommendations aimed at cohesive conflict management in schools, in times of crisis such as that of the recent pandemic.

In order for this research to fulfill its purpose/objectives, it has been structured as follows: initially, in the theoretical context, the concept, the causes, the consequences of conflicts and the necessity of having a good working environment in schools, especially in emergency situations such as the recent pandemic crisis, are discussed. The sample, the methodology and the main research results are subsequently presented. In the last part, the present study discusses the research results, reaches conclusions and makes recommendations for conflict management in primary schools and for further research on the matter.

2. Theoretical context: Conflicts at school and their management in times of crisis

The concept of conflict has received many interpretations and definitions over time (e.g. Appelbaum et al., 1999; Deutsch, 1990; Robbins & Judge, 2019; Thomas, 1992). It is often perceived negatively: "*that is, a behavior which aims to pose obstacles to someone else's effort to achieve their goals*" (e.g. Mullins, 2017:84). This definition speaks of incompatible actions and sees the phenomenon of conflict in a negative light (such as communication problems and the disruption of normal interpersonal relationships). However, positive dimensions are also recognized in the phenomenon of organizational conflict. For example, cohesion among the members of an organization and the improved performance or participation of its members in its actions have been documented as positive elements of conflict (Göksoy & Argon, 2016; Iordanides & Mitsara, 2014; Robbins & Judge, 2019). Characteristic in this regard is the statement of Everard et al. (2004:99), according to which "*the absence of conflict could be translated as evading responsibility, indifference, drowsiness*".

Nonetheless, whether seen as positive or negative, conflict is inevitable in multifaceted and open organizational environments, such as schools, where many different personalities, ideologies and behaviors coexist (Feirsen & Weitzman, 2022; Saitis & Saiti, 2018). It is a critical event, that is, a sudden, undesirable and to a certain extent unexpected event, that is likely to affect either favorably or unfavorably the mental health, the social & emotional balance and the communication of the school community members (Brock et al., 2016; National Education Association, 2018). The causes of this critical phenomenon concern either the internal environment of the school, such as miscommunication among teachers, anti-cooperative behavior, a negative working environment, the poor allocation of roles, stress, etc. (Antoniou et al., 2006; Iordanidis et al., 2014; Shahmohammadi, 2014), or its external environment which, due to a lack of financial resources, the constant change of school legislation and social problems, permeates the school-classroom environment (Göksoy & Argon, 2016; Iordanidis et al., 2014; Saitis & Saiti, 2018).

During the pandemic, the fact that the regulations imposed by the health protocols were questioned and new procedures were introduced for the school's teaching and administrative operation (e.g., regarding distance education as well as the manner in which students and visitors could access school premises) disrupted, as in any other organization (McKinsey & Company in Chon, 2020), their usual operation and exacerbated any conflicts therein. This is because the complexity of the school's operation was magnified and communication problems were exacerbated while cohesion, morale and the performance of school community members were all adversely impacted (Ertürk, 2022; Herrmann et al., 2021; Schult et al., 2022).

The most common types of conflict on the school premises, according to their causes and sources of origin, are (Feirsen & Weitzman, 2022; Saiti, 2014; Saitis & Saiti, 2018):

- *Cognitive*, which arises when, for example, two teachers explore their differences, compare them and finally reconcile them with a positive outcome for their school unit
- *Emotional*, which arise due to different personalities in school units and interpersonal incompatibilities that lead to strong, negative and incompatible emotions
- *Intrapersonal*, which is usually one-sided and internal and occurs when the actions of individuals (teachers) go against their beliefs
- *Interpersonal*, arising between members of the same school community
- *Intergroup* conflicts which arise, for example, between a teacher and the students of a class.

Taking into consideration the above typology as well as the fact that each conflict in the school environment is unique, they should equally be handled in a customized way each time they arise. A number of methods/techniques that can contribute to conflict management have been documented in the literature (e.g., Daft, 2020; Hitiris, 2017; Robbins & Judge, 2019; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2019). The main techniques used by leadership in managing conflicts in school units are as follows (Balay, 2006; Dean, 1995; Iordanides & Mitsara, 2014; Rahim, 2017; Saitis & Saiti, 2018):

- *The technique of avoidance*, in which a teacher constantly defers conflict, either because they are simply ignoring it or because they prefer to abstain
- *The technique of conciliation*, in which the parties maintain their differences but are forced to a solution
- *The technique of confrontation*, in which a third party, characterized by prestige and persuasion, brings the opposing parties to the same table to foster communication and explore the prospects that could resolve their differences.
- *The technique of power*, in which (for example) the school head orders their subordinate teachers to end their conflict when the latter cannot reach an agreement.
- *The technique of retreat*, which is based on the willingness to satisfy (e.g. a teacher satisfies the needs of another teacher, without however satisfying their own needs and expectations).
- *The technique of cooperation*, in which the opposing parties face the conflict and together try to reach a mutual solution.

In order for the aforementioned conflict resolution techniques to be applied effectively in a professional school environment, certain conditions must be met. In this regard, the following are considered to be of profound importance (Everard & Morris, 2004; Msila, 2012; Saiti & Papadopoulos, 2015; Saitis & Saiti, 2018): (a) competent school leadership, (b) a positive school climate, (c) maturity and special characteristics of the teaching staff (as they are shaped by the values, the age of the teachers, their field of expertise, and of course their individual traits), (d) open and honest communication, and (e) a rational organization of the school's operation (e.g. as regards the allocation of tasks and responsibilities among school community members).

In summary, conflicts that arise in social organizations such as schools constitute a complex process and their management is a fundamental responsibility of all school community members. As far as their effective management is concerned, this depends on the abilities/skills of the principal/leader, on the maturity of the members of the school community as well as on conditions in the external environment, as demonstrated by the recent health and social crisis of COVID-19.

3. Methodology

An anonymous questionnaire was deemed as the appropriate research tool for the present study, given that it has been utilized for data collection in similar studies in the past (e.g., Iordanides et al., 2014, Skordoulis et al., 2020). The content of the questionnaire was compiled by the research team upon a literature review of former relevant research by Balay (2006), Manesis et al. (2019) and Saiti (2014) as well as through an exchange of views with primary school teachers of the country's regional departments in which the survey was conducted: Attica, Viotia and Corinthia. The selection of these regions as the source of our research data was based on the fact that these geographical areas comprise, firstly, a variety of socio-economic environments and, secondly, large- and small-sized school units. In addition, the student population and teachers at schools in the metropolitan area of Athens, Attica, are likely to have been most affected by the consequences of social confinement during the recent health crisis, due to their densely-populated urban environment.

The questions were consolidated and took their final form after a trial application (with a Cronbach's alpha reliability index ≥ 0.80) in a small sample of 63 teachers who were subsequently excluded from the main sample of the research.

The questionnaire consists of five (5) parts with a total of twenty-four (24) questions, (dichotomous, multiple choice, rank order scaling and five-point Likert scale). The first part concerns the collection of general data in relation to the sample's school capacity and location. The second part aims at gathering demographic data in relation to teachers' gender, age, marital status, years of service, etc. The questions in the third and fourth parts of the questionnaire concentrate on the conflicts that occurred in schools during the pandemic. More specifically, those questions aimed at investigating the frequency and causes of conflicts at school, the times they occurred during the school year, their effects on school life, the practices and individuals who played a leading role in their management as well as the degree to which they were improved or aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, in the fifth part of the questionnaire, the teachers were expected to submit their recommendations on conflict management in their school in times of crisis, such as during the recent pandemic.

The questionnaire of the main survey was distributed by mail (conventional, electronic) during the period October-December 2021 to a sample of convenience which consisted of 185 primary school teachers whose demographic characteristics are listed in Table 1.

Analysis of the research findings was conducted with the aid of the statistical package SPSS (v. 25) and included the examination of the questionnaire's reliability using Cronbach α as well as correlation tables with chi-square χ^2 tests in order to ascertain statistically significant differences among groups (level of significance $\alpha=0,05$, 5%).

Table 1: Social-demographic characteristics of the sample

Traits	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I. Gender		
Male	43	23.2
Female	142	76.8
II. Age		
≤ 30 years old	31	16.8
31-40 years old	43	23.2
41-50 years old	59	33.5
≥ 51 years old	45	26.5
III. Marital status		
Married	126	68.1
Single	53	28.6
Other	6	3.2
IV. Studies in Management/School Management		
	26	14.1
V. Additional academic degrees		
Other undergraduate degree	21	11.4
PhD	7	3.8
Postgraduate	66	10.3
Training with duration of at least 6 months	19	35.7
No additional qualification	72	38.9
VI. Employment relationship with public education		
Permanent, fixed term position	110	61.9
Permanent under assignment or secondment	22	13.0
Temporary / On an hourly-paid basis	45	25.4
VII. Total time of service in education		
up to 10 years	49	27
11-20 years	63	33.5
≥ 20 years	66	39.5
H. Time of service in current school		
up to 5	88	51.4
6-10	43	26.5
≥10 years	39	22.2

4. Research results

Initially, the internal consistency of the main questionnaire was investigated, which showed that for all the questions of the questionnaire its reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, was high (over 0.803) and consequently the research results were statistically valid and useful.

Regarding the first question of the questionnaire's section aiming to reflect how frequently tensions were observed during the pandemic between teachers, the majority

of respondents answered that they occurred in school life either often (38.9%) or sometimes (36.8%).

Combining these responses initially with the school unit's capacity, the research results showed that teachers serving in large school units responded to a greater extent (82.5%) that conflicts occurred either often or very often during the pandemic period ($p=95.517$ at an observed level of statistical significance of 0.00). Subsequently, the combination of teachers' responses with their demographic characteristics revealed that tensions in the school unit occurred either often or very often during the pandemic according to (a) female teachers - 65.5% of the sample ($p=10.394$ at an observed statistical significance level of 0.034) - and (b) teachers of 30 years old or less - 80.7% of the sample ($p=21.135$ at an observed statistical significance level of 0.048).

As to what triggers school tensions, the majority (63.8%) answered that those arose as a result of both personal and work factors, 31.4% of the participants answered that the reasons were primarily work-related and only a small percentage (4.8%) characterized these reasons as purely personal.

When it came to work-related issues that concerned the school unit's operation and were accountable for conflicts, answers varied, as reflected in Table 2. However, miscommunication and unclear limits of responsibility among members of the school community were highlighted as more important.

Table 2: Work-related issues causing conflict at school during the pandemic

	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Average (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
i. Class distribution	2.2	24.9	22.7	30.8	13.5
ii. Assignment of extracurricular work	1.6	13.0	33.0	28.6	17.8
iii. Assignment of event organization	.5	16.8	28.1	23.2	24.3
iv. Use of supervisory equipment and computers	.5	11.9	21.1	27.6	32.4
v. Misinterpretation of information /miscommunication	1,9	23.2	24.3	23.2	11.4
vi. School administration	5.9	23.8	15.7	22.2	25.4
vii. Non-implementation of the operational regulations	2.7	20.0	18.4	25.4	25.9
viii. Introduction of innovation to the school	.5	3.2	36.8	22.2	30.3
ix. Students getting occupied in the absence of teachers	8.1	21.1	24.9	21.6	17.3
x. Teacher participation in decision-making	1.1	11.4	34.1	29.2	17.8
xi. Unclear limits of responsibility	8.1	23.8	20.0	21.6	20.5
xii. Assignment of playground supervision duties	4.9	18.9	22.2	22.7	23.8
xiii. Completion of working hours in other schools	2.7	11.4	24.9	19.5	35.1
xiv. Building facilities	1.6	14.1	23.2	25.9	28.6
xv. Use of photocopier	1.1	17.3	19.5	2,2	34.1
xvi. Lack of technological equipment	2.2	16.8	18.9	34.1	21.1
xvii. Evaluation system	8.1	21.1	28.6	18.9	17.3
xviii. Working conditions due to COVID-19	4.3	10.8	31.9	24.9	21.1
xix. Communication of the teachers' association via webex	.5	7.6	25.4	30.3	29.2

In addition to the previous question, the research results showed that conflicts caused in schools for official reasons were addressed, for the most part, with the mediation or intervention of the principal (37.3% and 21.6% respectively) and by a decision of the teachers' association (31.8%).

As regards the personal reasons that gave rise to conflicts, responses varied, as depicted in the following table. However, the most important factors identified seem to be the differences in teachers' mentality (culture), difficulties in their cooperation within the new electronic reality and poor communication/misinterpretation of information (see Table 3).

Table 3: Personal reasons for conflict at school during the pandemic

	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Average (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
i. Difficulties in teachers' cooperation	1.6	33.5	16.8	14.1	4.9
ii. Difficulty of cooperation between the principal and the teachers	2.7	21.6	18.9	16.8	10.8
iii. Lack of effective leadership	7.0	18.9	13.5	11.9	18.9
iv. Management of previous conflicts	4.3	24.3	14.1	14.1	12.4
v. Differences in culture	13.5	24.9	15.7	11.4	5.9
vi. Misinterpretation of information/poor communication	12.4	20.0	24.9	9.7	3.8
vii. Work-related stress	8.1	15.7	28.6	13.5	4.9
viii. Frequent absences of teachers	4.9	19.5	20.0	15.1	10.8
ix. Lack of cohesion among the Teachers' Association	9.2	15.7	18.9	16.8	9.2
x. Competition among teachers	5.4	15.7	25.9	13.0	10.3
xi. Different perceptions as regards administration/organization of a school unit	5.4	17.8	26.5	15.7	5.4

The individuals and management practices with the greatest impact in handling conflicts brought about by personal reasons during the pandemic were the mediation of the principal (23.8%), the initiative of a colleague (22.7%) and the collective decision of the teachers' association (18.9%).

The results of the survey also showed that there was variation in the intensity of conflicts during the COVID-19 period in schools. This was because the majority of the participating teachers stated that the conflicts between them were smoothed out either much (33.5%) or very much (22.7%) compared to the period before the pandemic. In combination with the school capacity, teachers in larger schools responded at a rate of 41.6% that the COVID-19 period normalized conflicts either much or very much ($p=17.250$ at the observed statistical significance level of 0.004). The participants cited that the main reasons for this normalization were their distance from the physical work environment through home teaching, online meetings of the teachers' associations, etc. (see Table 4).

Table 4: Reasons behind normalization of school conflict during the pandemic

	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Average (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
i. Distance learning	10.8	18.9	5.9	4.3	4.3
ii. Indirectness of communication	5.4	23.2	9.7	2.7	3.8
iii. Enforced abstinence from extra-curricular duties, which presuppose cooperation	8.6	18.9	8.1	5.4	4.3
iv. Inability to form sub-groups (cliques)	14.1	12.4	5.9	5.9	5.9
v. Lack of direct contact with the principal	9.2	13.0	9.7	7.0	5.9
vi. Indirect handling of students' problems	7.0	14.6	13.0	5.9	4.3
vii. The absence of the need to share school material	4.9	12.4	11.9	8.6	7.0
viii. Lack of playground supervision	6.5	20.5	6.5	5.4	5.9
ix. Lack of friction over the timetable	5.9	16.8	11.9	4.9	5.4

In addition, the teachers who participated in this survey stated that tensions and conflict in the school environment occurred mainly at the beginning of the school year, either much or very much (33.5%), whereas 65.9% affirmed the negative impact of conflict in relation to various dimensions of school life, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Negative implications of conflict on school life during the pandemic

	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Average (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
i. In the school's profile	8.6	39.5	30.3	9.7	6.5
ii. In the cooperation among the Teachers' Association members	20.0	51.4	14.1	5.9	3.8
iii. In the school climate	29.7	44.9	10.8	6.5	3.8
iv. In the educational process	11.4	20.5	34.1	16.8	12.4
v. In students' behavior	8.1	8.6	27.6	31.9	18.9
vi. In organizing school events	11.9	17.3	31.4	23.2	10.8

Only a small number of respondents (17.3%) identified the positive impact of conflicts in schools who stated, by agreeing either much or very much, that it concerned the following dimensions of school life (Table 6).

Table 6: The positive impact of conflict in school life during the pandemic

	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Average (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
i. On the professional development of teachers	2.2	17.8	15.7	25.4	33.0
ii. On improving the teaching process	3.2	13.0	23.2	20.0	34.1
iii. On developing creativity	3.2	9.2	27.6	21.6	32.4
iv. On promoting democratic dialogue	5.9	15.7	26.5	19.5	25.9
v. On improving teachers' relationships	5.9	13.5	21.6	21.6	29.7
vi. On finding more suitable solutions	7.0	19.5	24.3	22.2	20.0
vii. On reducing arbitrariness	5.4	20.0	28.1	21.6	18.9

viii. On fostering cohesion among the teachers' association members	5.9	16.2	25.4	19.5	27.6
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As regards ways to eliminate conflicts, participants considered an improvement in communication, training on conflict management issues and the adoption of operating regulations by the school unit as the most important (see Table 7).

Table 7: Ways of eliminating conflict during the pandemic

	Very much (%)	Much (%)	Average (%)	Little (%)	Not at all (%)
i. Comprehensive logistical resources	13.5	33.5	18.9	20.5	7.6
ii. Good communication among teachers	44.3	40.5	6.5	1.1	1.1
iii. Definition of the principal and teachers' roles	35.1	36.8	14.1	3.8	2.7
iv. Presence of permanent teaching staff	21.6	27.6	27.6	15.1	2.2
v. Implementation of school unit's operating regulations	29.2	41.6	14.1	4.9	2.2
vi. Training on conflict management	35.1	40.0	13.5	3.2	1.6

Finally, teachers also provided recommendations for conflict management in their schools in times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most important of which is the consolidation of cooperative culture, a sense of duty, open dialogue, the assumption of individual responsibility, training for the principal and teachers on conflict resolution as well as good communication among teachers.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the views of teachers on the phenomenon of conflicts in schools during the pandemic. The research results showed that conflicts continued to exist during the pandemic crisis, especially in large school units, and were mostly perceived as such by women and younger teachers. The finding that conflicts have continued to be a feature of school life, even during the recent pandemic, could initially be attributed to the large number of teachers (30-35) who usually serve in school units, each of whom having their own personality/principles - an element that has often been identified as the cause of conflicts in schools (Ertürk, 2022; Pantiuk et al., 2019; Türk & Ceylan, 2020). In addition, the above finding can be justified in that during the pandemic, health protection and social distancing measures (Bavel et al., 2020; Sheridan et al., 2020) exacerbated many people's social behaviour (see Kocak et al., 2021; Melki et al.; 2022; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). This exacerbation was inevitably manifested in the context of the meetings held by the teachers' association (whether in person or electronically) - the principal decision-making body in the Greek school system for the pedagogical and teaching work conducted therein.

The finding that women and young teachers experience tensions in school to a greater extent could be attributed to (a) the increased obligations (social, family) of the

women who participated in the survey (the majority of the participants in this survey were female married teachers), (b) the fact that young teachers employed on a temporary or hourly-basis in schools, with non-permanent positions, have not been properly integrated into the school climate nor have they developed ties of cooperation with their colleagues who could have helped them better manage the emergency measures imposed on schools during the pandemic in a spirit of cooperation and consensus, (c) the findings of previous research (e.g. Fränkl et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2020; Veldhuis, 2020) indicating that interpersonal variables such as age, gender and marital status affect the way individuals respond in situations of crisis and disaster.

As for the causes of conflicts, this research suggests that they equally concern work-related and personal reasons, similar to the findings of research conducted prior to the pandemic (e.g., Iordanides et al., 2014; Saiti, 2015), thus highlighting the presence of both cognitive and emotional conflicts in schools. In further identifying the causes of conflicts in schools, in the case of cognitive conflict (namely work-related issues), research highlighted the significant role of unclear limits of responsibility, poor communication, evaluation of the teaching work, centralized management, occupying students in their teacher's absence and the allocation of classes at the beginning of each school year. These are all operational issues that tend to cause conflicts in school units and indeed have been cited as sources of conflict in schools in previous research (e.g., Göksoy & Argon, 2016, Saiti, 2015). However, according to this research, their effect was magnified by the pandemic crisis. This is probably due to the fact that this latest pandemic crisis has caused great disruption to the basic functions of all organizations (see Naughton, 2020) but also because the aforementioned issues that caused the cognitive conflicts in schools are crucial, as they are equally related to the pedagogical, teaching and administrative work carried out therein and the professional identity of teachers. However, special mention should be made of the fact that teacher evaluation constituted a source of conflict in schools during the period of this research. This is because the legislative framework for the evaluation of school units (Law 4823/2021) was implemented for the first time during the pandemic, resulting in uncertainty and distrust on the part of the educational community members, mainly owing to the fact that the criteria set were not considered clear and objective (Barda & Koutouzis, 2021).

Regarding emotional conflicts at schools during the COVID-19 period, teachers replied that difficulty in cooperation, the outcome of previous conflicts and diverse mentalities and emotions were mainly to blame. Thus, the above reiterate and establish the lack, but also the importance, of cohesion among members of the teachers' association in Greek schools (Papadatou & Alexopoulos, 2019) as well as the need to limit teachers' mobility which negatively affects the school climate, making a commonly accepted school culture hard to develop and ultimately hindering the pedagogical, teaching and learning work in schools (Alexopoulos, 2019).

The intervention and mediation of the director, the decisions of the teachers' association (in cognitive conflicts) and the intervention of a teacher (in personal conflicts) were highlighted by the current research, in accordance with its objectives, as the

principal players and methods of tackling school conflicts (whether official or personal) during the pandemic. This result is consistent with that of research conducted prior to the pandemic (Tekos & Iordanides, 2011; Volakaki, 2015) and contrary to that of research outside the field of education, where the role of managers in resolving organizational conflict during the pandemic was questioned by staff (Syed, 2020). The finding of this research can be justified on the basis that the above two school administration bodies in Greece (the principal and the school unit's teachers' association) are, according to the relevant legislation and the opinion of the teaching community, the main pillars for "*the exercise of the participatory administration in the country's schools*" (Kefis, 2005:125-126) and the "*formation of the school climate*" (Saitis & Saiti, 2018). Moreover, this finding could be attributed to the limited degree of autonomy enjoyed by Greek schools, which prevents the development of initiatives on the part of individual teachers when it comes to resolving school conflicts through compromise, as well as to the absence of mentorship from schools, an institution which could contribute decisively in this regard.

As regards the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis period influenced positively or negatively the phenomenon of conflicts at school, the majority of teachers replied that this effect was overall positive. More specifically, the results showed that, compared to the period before the pandemic, conflicts at school for both personal and work-related reasons were defused. This finding emphasizes, similar to related research (Chon et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2021), the positive contribution of crises in social organizations like schools, in that meaningful and honest feedback is provided while creative thinking is also fostered. This finding might also be credited, among other things, to the reduced number of multiple interactions among the school community members owing to distance teaching, the need to solve new problems concerning the school operation during the pandemic (educational, administrative), and the lack of playground supervision of a large number of students attending schools (≥ 200). It should be noted that supervising students during breaktimes is a crucial issue in the school's daily operation as it ensures students' health and safety. Consequently, due to its critical nature, it constitutes a source of frequent friction/conflict in school over how it is organized and implemented (Qalawa et al., 2021; Salminen et al., 2014, Zagel et al., 2019). As for the period during which tensions are usually observed in their school environment, the respondents identified the beginning of the school year. This finding is in line with that of other Greek research (Karagiorgas, 2018) and is probably due to the need to decide upon an increased number of issues in September (e.g., drawing up the timetable and allocating classes among teachers) as well as the absence of a cohesive induction scheme for incoming teachers at the beginning of the school year. The aforementioned has been established as factors that prevent teachers from interacting and communicating as well as developing trust relationships (Alexopoulos, 2019, Kyrou et al., 2020).

One of the aims of this research was also to investigate the overall impact of conflicts in schools. The majority of the participants stated, similar to previous research (Saibo, 2016), that conflicts have a negative bearing on the school's profile, mainly in

terms of cooperation and school climate. There were only a few who recognized positive elements in the existence of conflicts in school, mainly as a means of reducing arbitrariness and producing more appropriate solutions in decision-making. It should be noted that the deduction that conflicts can have both negative and positive consequences for the school unit is consistent with modern administrative theory, as problems are more easily identified, solutions are proposed, the most appropriate solution is selected and the relations of the organization members are enhanced as a result of a conflict (Hitiris, 2011, 2017; Manesis et al, 2019; Robbins & Judge, 2019; Saitis & Saiti, 2018).

Regarding the extent to which a number of specific factors would help eliminate conflicts in the school unit in the best way possible, this research highlighted the importance of good communication between teachers, the clear definition of the principal's and the teachers' association's roles, the existence of more comprehensive logistical infrastructure and the implementation of school regulations. The value of a collaborative climate, the resolution of conflict in school as well as good communication, the need for training seminars for principals and teachers, the provision of incentives, the assistance offered by a specialist in crisis/conflict management in schools and the introduction of a relevant mandatory subject in the teachers' training curriculum were further identified by teachers themselves as additional contributing factors to this end.

6. Conclusion – Recommendations

Unlike previous research, this paper examines the phenomenon of conflict in primary schools at a time of crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. It initially indicates that conflicts in schools continued to be part of school life during the pandemic despite the restrictions on the physical presence of teachers and students in the teaching/learning domains. These conflicts were found to concern existing issues prior to the pandemic and to a lesser extent reflected problems that arose as a result of health protection measures against the new coronavirus, the extensive use of ICT, distance teaching and the new conditions of organization and operation to which schools had to adapt. Despite their occurrence, however, conflicts in the school environment seemed to have been largely tempered as compared to the pre-pandemic period. In addition, they contributed decisively to the tackling of issues that emerged regarding the operation of the school as a consequence of the new health and social conditions. This finding is of particular importance as it demonstrates that the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, just like any other crisis, in fact, takes on both negative and positive qualities.

Regarding the extent to which a number of specific factors would help eliminate conflicts in the school unit to the greatest extent, this research highlighted the importance of good communication among teachers, a clear definition of roles for the principal and the teachers' association, improved logistical infrastructure and the implementation of the school's regulation. Teachers' recommendations highlighted as additional contributing factors the value of the collaborative climate, the confrontation of conflicts in the school as well as good communication, the need for training seminars offered to

principals and teachers, the creation of incentives, the aid provided by specialists in crisis/conflict management in the school unit and the introduction of a relevant mandatory subject in the curriculum of teachers' education.

The principal and the teachers' association had the leading roles in conflict management in schools, mainly through their mediation. This finding, however, seems to ignore the importance of compromise regarding the school climate and long-term sincere cooperation in schools. On the other hand, a collaborative climate, communication, as well as training/informing school community members on issues of communication and conflict management, all emerged as key factors in effective conflict management in schools.

This research also indicates that the main reasons behind school conflicts during the pandemic were cognitive and emotional, emphasizing that they presented a peak at the beginning of the school year and identified their negative impact on the overall school profile during this socially sensitive period. Finally, noteworthy are the statistically significant differences identified in relation to the objectives of this research (mainly in regard to the frequency of conflicts during the pandemic), contingent upon the sample's demographic data, namely gender and age.

The present research study is subject to limitations primarily due to its sample's limited size and geographical distribution. For this reason, it is recommended that it be carried out on a larger sample and on a broader scale in Greece. Collecting data from other education levels while also comparing it with this study's results would also be of value. In addition, it is highly advisable to further investigate the factors that would contribute to conflict management in sensitive times of crises such as those of the COVID-19 pandemic, both inside and outside the classroom.

As far as daily life at school is concerned, the results of this survey are expected to help the principal assume a more prominent role in crisis management in the future and not risk having their leadership role questioned in such circumstances (see Beilstein et al., 2021). Principals can accomplish that by: (a) identifying the causes of conflict in times of crisis, such as a pandemic, (b) focusing on effective and realistic conflict management, for example through teachers' training on communication issues, promoting the induction of new teachers, updating/implementing the school's regulations for its operation, (c) highlighting the positive aspects of conflict when it comes to the cohesion of the school community and (d) encouraging the provision of feedback by teachers as well as their own self-evaluation when it comes to managing critical incidents in school.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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