



# MULTILINGUAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/MAJESS/v2-i2/1389>

DOI: 10.6007/MAJESS/v2-i2/1389

**Received:** 07 September 2014, **Revised:** 29 October 2014, **Accepted:** 04 November 2014

**Published Online:** 17 December 2014

**In-Text Citation:** (Iordanides et al., 2014)

**To Cite this Article:** Iordanides, G. D., Bakas, T., Saiti, A. C., & Ifanti, A. A. (2014). Primary Teachers' and Principals' Attitudes towards Conflict Phenomenon in Schools in Greece. *Multilingual Academic Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 30–52.

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Vol. 2, No. 2, 2014, Pg. 30 – 52

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## Primary Teachers' and Principals' Attitudes towards Conflict Phenomenon in Schools in Greece

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the views of primary school teachers and principals in Greece and record their suggestions about the conflicts in their work environment, namely the causes, the management and the results of this phenomenon. In particular, an empirical study was conducted during the school year 2010-2011 using anonymously written questionnaires, which were disseminated to teachers and principals at primary schools throughout the thirteen (13) educational regions in Greece. One thousand and forty-three teachers (1043) out of 1400 were responded (response rate: 74.55%) as well as 340 school principals out of 400 (response rate: 85%). Research data revealed the close relationship between the conflict management and the betterment of the work environment conditions at schools and underlined the need for the training of both, principals and teachers, upon issues of organizational behavior. Additionally, it

was pointed out that principals should further develop specific skills for the management of human sources in their school. It was also indicated the need for initiating constructive internal regulations in schools in order to ensure their efficiency.

**Keywords:** Conflicts, Teachers, Principals, Views, Primary Schools, Greece.

### **Introduction**

School as a social organization consists of pupils, teachers, principals, staff etc., each of whom performs his/her own individual task, and altogether collaborate and interact aiming to achieve specific objectives. To realize these objectives, a school unit must operate effectively. One of the most crucial elements, which has been recognized by several researchers, is concerned with good interpersonal relationships amongst the members of the school community and affects positively the operation of schools (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Stall & Mortimore, 1997; Gaziel & Ifanti, 2011; Kula, 2011; Woven et al. 2011; Saiti & Saitis, 2012).

In fact, the smooth and efficient operation of an education unit is achieved, when there is a good cooperation between managers and the staff, a good communication between teachers and their students and when teachers' personal needs are being satisfied. On the other hand, the depressing and unappealing atmosphere exudes a feeling of fear and frustration, which affects negatively the quality of work performed by the teachers as well as the overall effectiveness process of the school unit.

The above considerations support the idea that there is a close relationship between the work environment and the effectiveness of a school unit. Of course, this link does not happen at random. Instead, the role of school leadership seems to be crucial since it is claimed that "the original duty of directors is to design and maintain a suitable environment for efficient performance" (Koontz & O'Donnell 1983: 94). In the world of educational reality, ensuring the orientation of individuals in a school unit as also the coordination of all the tendencies with its objectives does not seem to be an easy administrative task.

This happens because there is a set of variables, as for example lack of coherence due to the mobility of the teaching staff (Darra, Prokopiadou & Saitis, 2010), the issue of organizational weaknesses (Gaziel et al. 2012; Saiti & Saitis, 2012), the reduction of material resources (Prokopiadou, 2009), the individual differences of teachers (Paraskevopoulos, 2008; Ifanti, & Fotopoulou, 2010), that are associated with the school life and influence the members of the school environment in a negative way creating conflicts.

Regarding the conflict phenomenon at the schools' work environment in Greece some particular issues have been identified as follows:

- The majority of teachers have come across conflict situations towards their school head and fellow-teachers, confirming the point that conflicts are common within social organizations (Saitis, Darra & Psarri, 1996:136).
- The phenomenon of conflicts in schools is one of the reasons for the cancellation or delay of a set of expectations and goals (Valsamidis, 1996:38).
- School directors make use of authoritarian practices in the wrong way, creating thus problems in their relationships with the teachers and resulting in a difficulty "to promote the school run" (Lymperis, 2003: 156).

- The coexistence of people from different social, political and cultural backgrounds, different sexes and ages, and with diverse interests in educational organizations, tend to facilitate conflicts (Fasoulis, 2006:523).
- While directors and teachers recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships, in practice “we can refer to actual good relations between them in few cases...” (Kula 2011: 206).
- The phenomenon of conflict “does exist in schools...” and “the causes for conflicts among teachers are not only based on bureaucratic reasons nor just on personal ones, but it appears to be a combination of them” (Toziou, 2012: 117).

Taking into account the aforementioned points, it becomes clear that the conflict phenomenon appears to be a reality in Greek schools. In the light of this debate and given that (a) the school is the basic educational unit and (b) the purpose of schooling will fail unless there is a positive work environment, it is obvious that a systematic conflict resolution at schools is an urgent need in our country.

This paper aims to explore the views of teachers and principals at primary schools in Greece about the impact of conflicts in their school work and how do they resolve them.

The specific research hypotheses of this study are addressed as follows:

Y1.Conflicts in the work environments of primary schools appear very frequently.

Y2.Conflicts occurring in the work environment of primary schools are due to various causes.

Y3.To resolve conflicts, the school leadership plays a crucial role.

Y4.In the work environment of primary schools, conflicts produce negative effects.

Y5.Management conflicts amongst the members of a school unit vary depending on the individuals’ characteristics (e.g.: gender, age, years of service etc.) as well as the way the school unit is administered and managed.

In the next part of this paper, firstly, a brief literature review of the issue under consideration is attempted and, secondly, the data of an empirical research which was carried out in primary schools in Greece are presented and discussed.

### **The Discourse About Conflicts in the School Environment**

As mentioned above the conflicts provoked in the school work environment occur as an inevitable phenomenon in the context of the members’ collective efforts. In the literature review of this topic, the term “conflict” is perceived as follows: a) It is “a conflict between at least two parties, which have incompatible goals, rare rewards, and consider the interference of the other party as an obstacle to achieve their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991: 23); b) It is “the behavior, which is designed to highlight obstacles in trying someone else to achieve its objective” (Mullins 1996: 724); c) It is “the situation where the behavior of an individual or a group intentionally seeks to prevent the achievement of another person or group” (Bourandas, 2001: 419); d) It is “the power of an individual or a group (of individuals) who consciously aims to prevent or limit the desired action of another person or group (of individuals) to achieve his objectives” (Saiti & Saitis, 2012: 297). As a result the conflict is nothing more than a situation where two or more members involved in an organization are in conflict and, in many cases, it can be disastrous for the smooth and efficient function of the organization.

In schools, in which the organizational environment is characterized by a recognized complexity in terms of procedures, roles and rules of operation, there are a lot of various contrasts. a) They may be interpersonal, i.e.: those which arise between members of the school community. b)

They may appear among groups, i.e.: those arising, for example, between the teaching staff and the association of parents in the same school. c) They may be found between individuals and groups, as for example those that arise between the principal and the teaching staff in a school (Chytiris, 2001; Saiti & Saitis, 2012).

Among the major factors responsible for the growth of conflicts in the school working environment are the following: the miscommunication amongst school members, the management of leadership in a competitive and confrontational mood, the lack of resources, the individual differences met in the educational units, the schools' organizational weaknesses etc. (Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, 1999, Everard & Morris, 1999; Paraskevopoulos, 2008; Panitsidou & Papastamatis, 2010).

Until recently, the conflict in an organization (the school is included) was considered to be a negative phenomenon, since in many cases the competition between the members of a group, that is when people do not simply want to convince others but they also want to impose their own terms, results in an emotionally charged state with negative feelings, which can become a destructive issue in the organization (Burns, 1978; Baron, 1985).

However, modern administrative concepts have indicated that in the management of conflicts both creativity and productivity are being increased because the level of individuals' involvement in the activities of the organization is enhanced (De Dreu & De Vliert, 1997; Tjosvald et al 2001). It is also associated with the opportunity taken by stakeholders to learn something about themselves and others, to challenge outdated ways of thinking, and to create new ways to cultivate relationships and cooperation (Fasoulis, 2006).

Regardless positive or negative effects of conflicts, an urgent demand towards school principals is to understand, when facing a conflict, that it is upon them to manage it properly. Moreover, according to the literature on the topic (Walton 1969; Hunt 1981; Dean 1995; Chen & Tjosvald, 2002; Papastamatis, 2005; Saiti & Saitis, 2012), there are several ways of managing conflicts in the workplace, as for instance avoiding or ignoring compromise, the art of mediation, the use of power and the technique of cooperation.

The clash between members of a group who have administrative roles (e.g.: the teaching staff of a school unit) as an expression of different views on the mode of action of this group is inevitably beneficial. In such forms of conflicts, the appropriate management is a key concern of the school principal. But whether a school principal is effective it depends not only on the appropriate skills (e.g.: careful listening, consulting, intelligence) that formulate the positive working environment (Everard & Morris, 1996; Hayes, 2002; Hoy & Miskel, 2005) nor on the power imposed due to his/her position. There are also some other conditions cited below:

- The characteristics of teachers: teachers with an incompatible personality may create a climate of competition, which, in turn, leads to low performance disagreements within school.
- The consistency of the school community: in schools with a high cohesion, conflicts between teachers are being minimized and a better communication is attained.
- The rules and procedures: the rules of the school are patterns, according to which teachers should adapt their behavior in order to be accepted by the school community (Saiti & Saitis, 2012).

It can be thus stated that as school organizations become more complex nowadays, the problems which arise from internal disagreements appear more frequently. Therefore, any type of school conflicts are inevitable and must be treated promptly and effectively.

What follows is the presentation of a survey on school conflicts which was carried out in primary schools in Greece.

### **Sample and Method**

The survey was conducted during the second term of the school year 2010-2011 using anonymously written questionnaires, which were disseminated to teachers and school principals who were working at primary schools in the thirteen (13) educational regions in Greece (this is the total number of educational regions in the country). Fourteen hundred (1400) questionnaires were distributed to equal number of primary teachers (1400) throughout the thirteen regions. One thousand and forty-three teachers (1043) responded (response rate: 74.55%). At the same time, four hundred questionnaires (400) were also distributed to equal number of school principals (400) at the same schools. Three hundred and forty principals (340) responded (response rate: 85%).

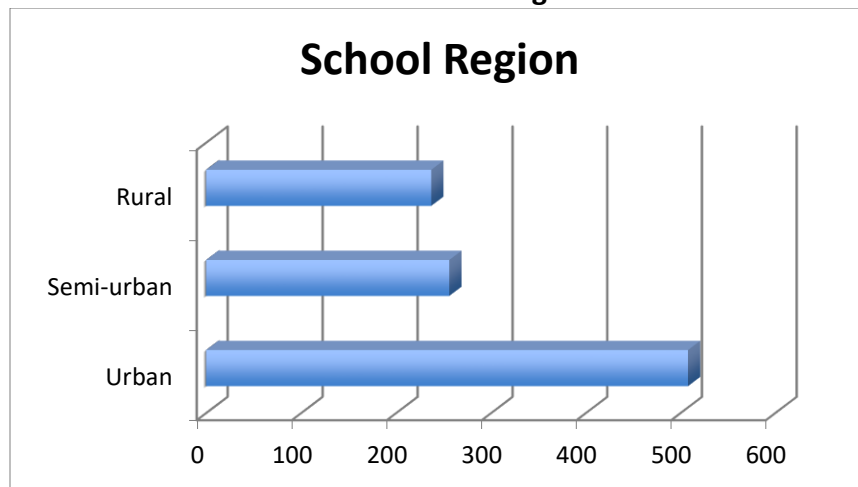
The questionnaire was consisted of four parts. The first part was concerned with teachers' permanent position status in schools and the district of the school units. The second part was dealt with the demographic features of the sample (teachers and principals), i.e.: their permanent position status at school, the gender, the age, the total years of their service at school, the years of their service at the school where they were working during the survey, their marital status, their status at school and their studies. The third part of the questionnaire included questions to which teachers and principals were requested to answer, and they were concerned with the frequency, the causes, the consequences and the ways of resolving conflicts in their work environment. Finally, the fourth part contained one (1) open-ended question on how teachers and principals were dealing with conflicts in their schools.

Data analysis was organized within contingency tables with the appropriate controls ( $X^2$ ). The elements of statistical significance  $\alpha = 0.05$  (5%) or  $\alpha = 0.1$  (10%) were used for controls. The SPSS (v.20) was used for the statistical analysis of data.

### **The Primary Education Teachers' Sample**

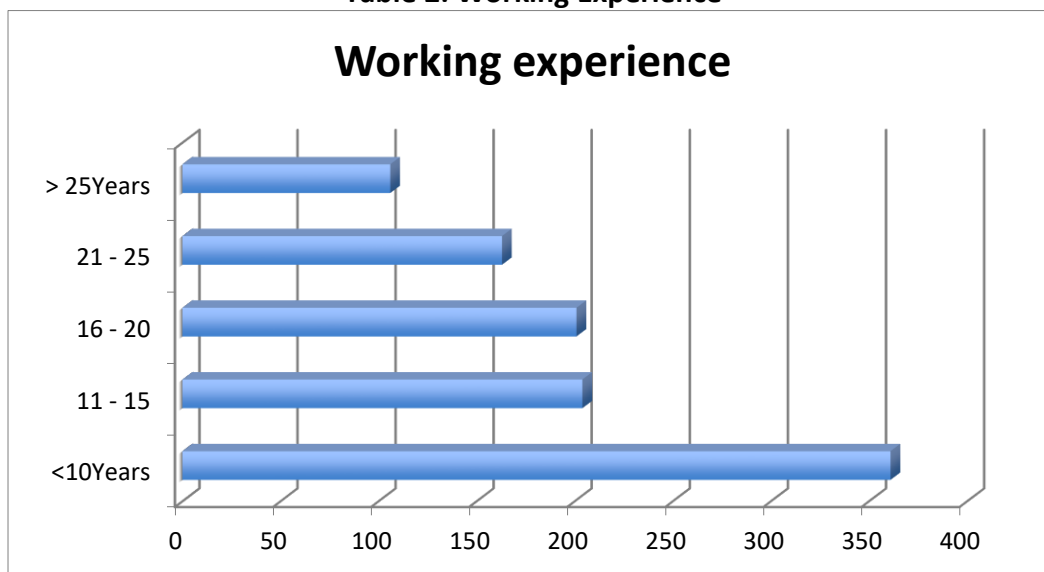
As far as the permanent position status of the schools was concerned, 53.6% of teachers were serving in 8-class schools up to 12-class schools, 40.0% in 4-class up to 7-class schools and only 6.4% in one-class up to 3-class schools. Additionally, 49.8% of teachers were working at schools in urban areas, 26.2% in suburban areas and 24.0% in rural areas (see Table 1).

**Table 1: School Region**



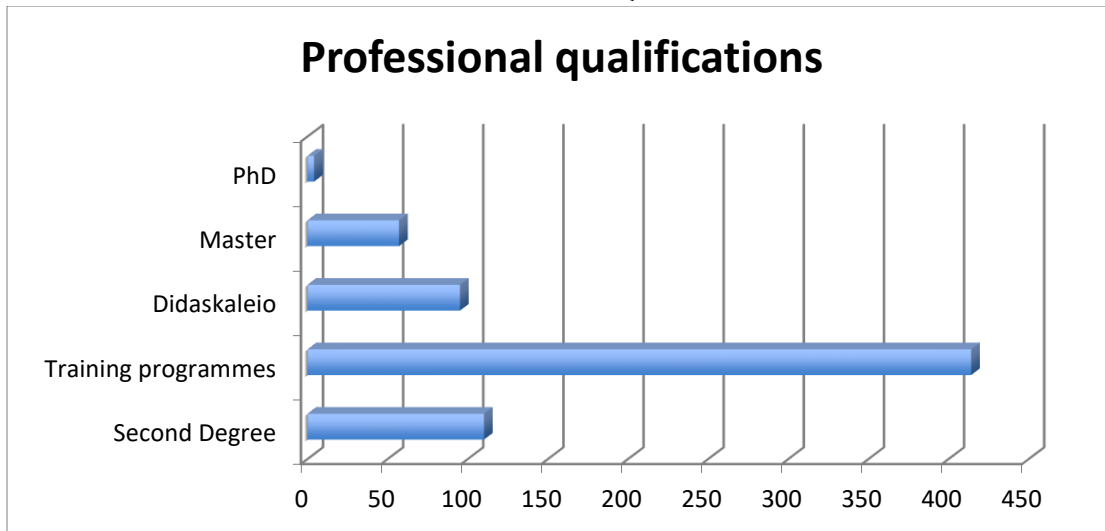
Regarding gender, the majority of respondents (69.6%) were women and only 30.4% were men. Concerning age, 51.9% of teachers were ranged between 41 to 50 years, 21.7% were between 31 and 40 years, 20.2% were under 30 years and only 6.2% were 51 years old or more. As regards the total years of service in public schools, 34.6% of the teachers were ranged from 1 to 10 years, 20.1% were found to be from 11 to 15 years, 19.3% were from 16 to 20 years, 15.8% were from 21 to 25 years, and 10.2% had 26 or more years of service in education (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Working Experience**



Regarding marital status, the majority of respondents (64.9%) was married, 30.15% were unmarried and 4.6% of them answered "other". As for their post at schools, 89.8% of the sample had a permanent position and 10.2% had not. As for their professional qualifications, 10.5% had got a bachelor degree from the University or from the Technical Education Institutions, and only 5.9% had a Master's degree. Finally, 48.8% of the respondents had attended other education and training courses (see Table 3).

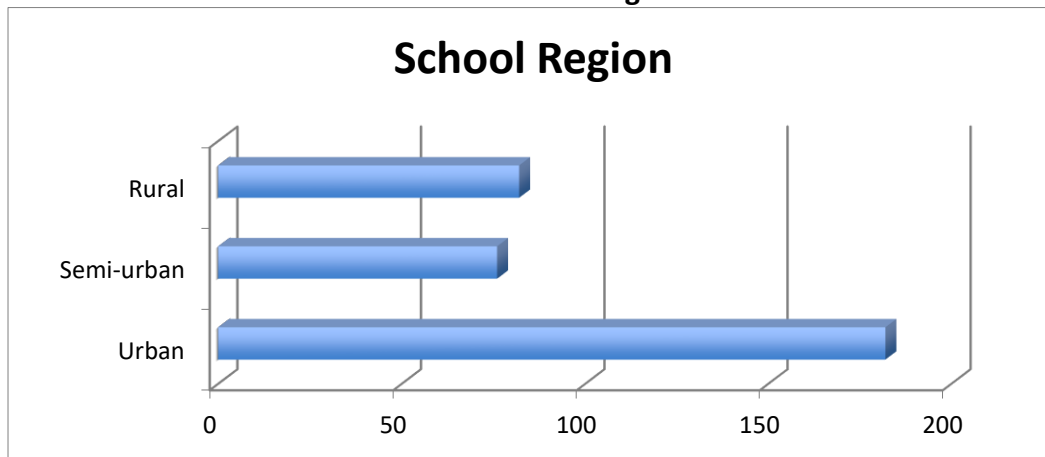
**Table 3: Professional Qualifications**



**The Primary Education Principals' Sample**

As for the permanent position status of the school principals, 38.5% of them were working in 12-class schools and 22.6% in 6-class schools, the two representative types of primary schools in the country. The majority of school principals (53.2%) was working in urban areas, 22.4% of them in suburban areas and 24.1% in rural areas (see Table 4).

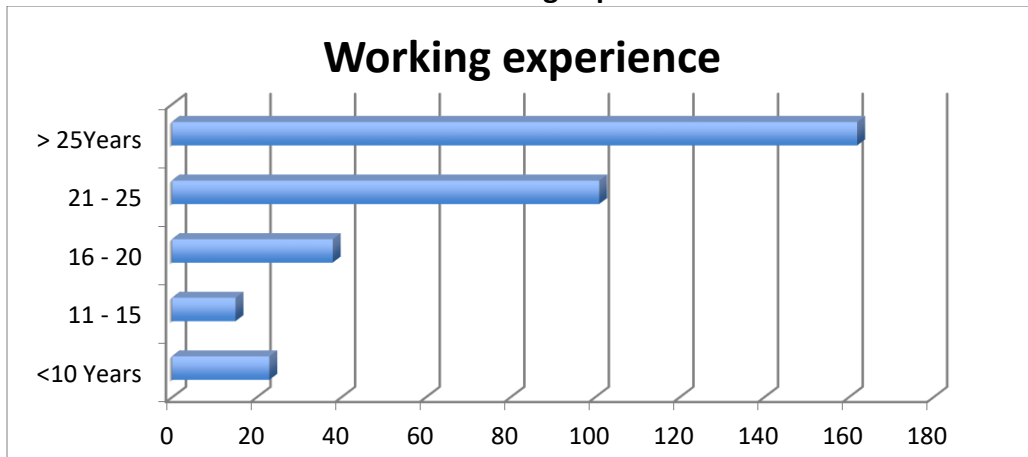
**Table 4: School Region**



Regarding gender, the majority of respondents (68.2%) was men and 31.8% were women. As for their age, 58.5% of the respondents were between 41 and 50 years and 30.3% were over 50 years old. As concerns the total years of service in public education, 47.6% of them had over 25 years of teaching experience at schools and 30.0% were ranged between 20 and 25 years (see Table 5).

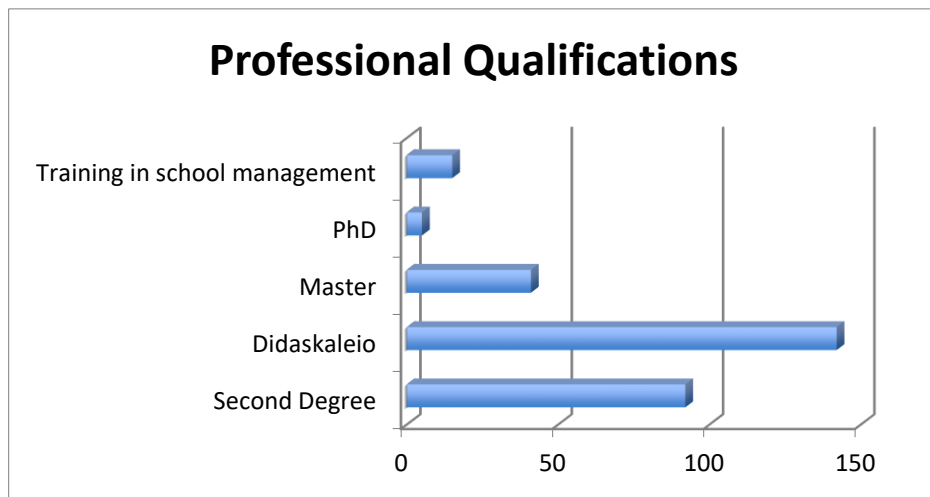


**Table 5: Working Experience**



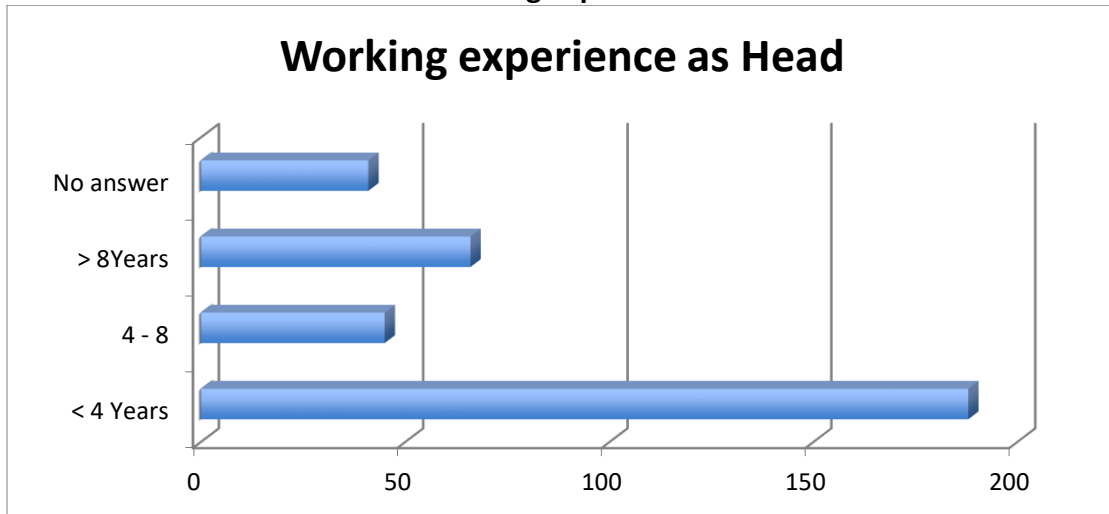
Regarding their marital status, the majority of the respondents (84.4%) was married and 11.50% were single. As for their professional qualifications, 27.1% had got a second degree from the University or the Technical Education Institutions, 41.8% had attended emulation training programmes pursuing a University degree, 12.1% had attended the teachers' training school, only five (5) respondents (1.5 %) had got a Master's degree and fifteen (15) (4.4%) had got a Ph.D. degree (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Professional Qualifications**



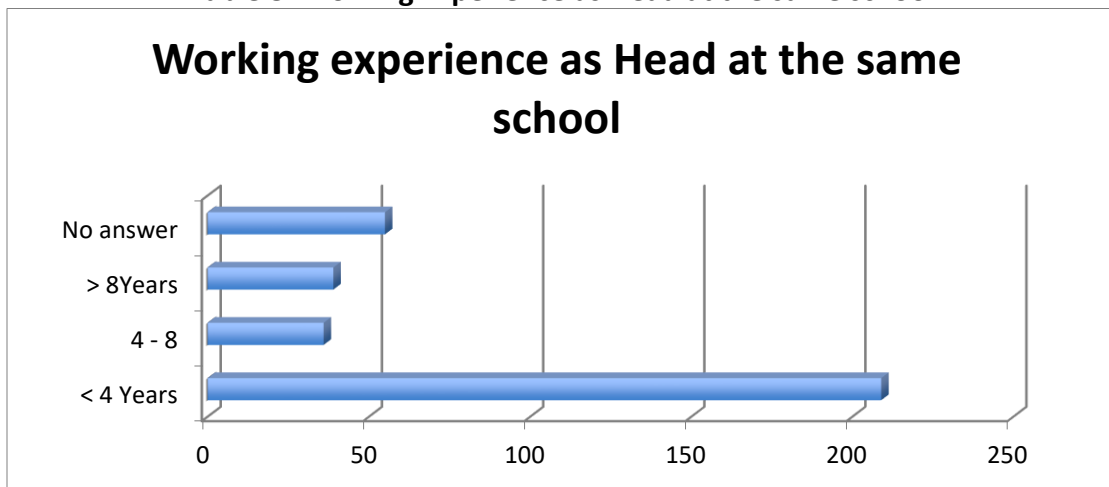
In regard to the period of their service as school principals, most of them (55.3%) had got less than 4 years of service (see Table 7).

**Table 7: Working experience as Head**



The percentage of the respondents who were serving as school principals at the same school for less than 4 years was even higher (61.5%) (Table 8).

**Table 8: Working Experience as Head at the same school**



**Data Analysis**

In the question "How often conflicts between teachers are observed in your school environment?", 100% (n = 1043) of the teachers responded. 16.3% of them answered "never", 50.6% answered "rarely", 20.8% replied "sometimes", 11.1% "often" and 1.2% "very often". The same question was also answered by 100% of the school principals (n = 340). In particular, 20.29% of them said that conflicts between teachers "often" occur, and only 1.47% answered "very often". The accumulation of the responses of school principals noting "often" and "very often" was in total almost double in percentage compared with the corresponding school teachers' answers.

The above findings in relation to their permanent position status at schools revealed a correlation between two variables, i.e.: the permanent position status at school and the frequency of conflict incidents, since both  $X^2$  (100.898;  $p = 0.002$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (0.097) were statistically significant. In particular, regarding teachers' responses, this correlation was positive; this means that as the permanent position status increases, the frequency of conflict incidents in the school work environment increases as well. In other words, the larger the primary schools are, the cases for more frequent conflicts they are faced with.

The same correlation was also found as regards the responses of school principals, because both  $X^2$  (14.597;  $p = 0.067$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (0.111) were statistically significant. Here, again, the correlation was positive; this implies that when the permanent position at school increases, the frequency of conflict incidents increases as well. This means that large schools are more frequently faced with school conflicts.

Furthermore the school area factor was also related to the above data. Teachers' replies showed that there was a correlation between the two variables involved (the area of school units and the frequency of school conflicts), since  $X^2$  (14.712;  $p = 0.005$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (0.098) were statistically significant. Specifically, the correlation was positive; this implies that when the primary school district is urban, then the frequency of collisions increases in the work environment of the primary school. In other words, the large primary schools in urban areas of the country have got more frequent conflicts compared to smaller schools in suburban and rural areas. On the other hand, it was not observed a similar correlation in the school principals' responses.

Furthermore, as concerns the responses of the school principals, there was a correlation between the variables of gender and the incidence of conflict, since both  $X^2$  (15.151;  $p = 0.004$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0.191) were statistically significant. Specifically, the correlation was negative and this implied that the schools with female principals had got less conflict incidents at schools.

Additionally, regarding the responses of the principals, there was a correlation between the variables of the total teaching service period and the incidents of conflicts, since both  $X^2$  (42.911;  $p = 0.000$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0.102) were statistically significant. In this case, the correlation was negative and this meant that the longer total period the school principals were in service in the public education sector, the less likely it was for conflict incidents to occur at schools.

The question "If your answer is "often" or "very often", which reasons would you provide?" was answered by the 12.3% of the teachers. 13.3% of them referred to "official purposes", 3.1% reported "personal reasons" and 83.6% mentioned the "combination" of the two factors. The same question was also answered by the 21.76% of the school principals; 9.45% of them referred to "official purposes", 6.75% reported "personal reasons" and 83.78% mentioned a "combination" of these two factors.

In relation to the correlations between variables, a positive correlation was found between the school principals' total years in service and the high percentage of personal reasons, since both  $X^2$  (8.435;  $p = 0.015$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (0.263) were statistically significant. This means that when the school principals' total years of service increase in the public education sector, the more likely it is for conflict incidents to occur at schools due to personal reasons.

A positive correlation was also revealed between the managerial tenure at the same school and the high percentage of personal reasons for conflicts, since both  $X^2$  (15.929;  $p = 0.000$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (0.426) were statistically significant. In other words, when the total years of service of the principals at the same school increase, the more likely it is for conflicts to occur at their schools which are caused by personal reasons.

In addition, there was a negative correlation between the variables regarding the length of the principals' service at the same school and the high percentage of the combination of personal and official reasons which cause conflict incidents, since both  $X^2$  (7.782;  $p = 0.020$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0.262) were statistically significant. This implies that with the increase in total years of experience as a principal at the same school it is less likely to have conflicts in school caused by both personal and official reasons.

In the same context, the responses of the school principals indicated a negative correlation between the variables concerning the area of school and the high percentage of personal reasons for the creation of conflict incidents, since both  $X^2$  (3.199;  $p = 0.074$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0.208) were statistically significant. This means that when the school is located in an urban area it is less likely to have conflicts. In contrast, there was a correlation of variables between the area of school and the high percentage of official-operational reasons for conflicts, since both  $X^2$  (5.574;  $p = 0.018$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (0.274) was statistically significant. However, this correlation was positive; this means that when the school is located in an urban area it is more likely for school conflicts to occur due to official-operational reasons.

The question "If the reasons are operational, could you rank the above mentioned conditions (e.g.: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.) as causing conflicts in the work environment of a school?" was answered by 12.1% of the teachers and their answers were varying. When the first choices of the sample were ranked hierarchically, the responses showed the major causes of conflict incidents as follows: the distribution of classes (33.6%), the completion of the timetable (20.7%), the lack of regulations in the school (15.5%), and the distribution of pupils in other classes due to the absence of teachers (14.7%). On the other hand, the corresponding question was answered by 21.76% of the school principals. As for their part, the highest percentage (31.1%) stated the distribution of classes as the major cause of conflicts, 23.0% reported the lack of regulations for the school operation and 16.2% indicated the responsibility for organizing school events.

The question "In what ways does the school principal deal with conflicts caused by operational reasons (evaluate hierarchically: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.)?" was answered by 12.1% of the teachers and their responses were varying. 37.1% of the respondents put forward the role of the teaching staff meetings from the perspective of the school principals as a key managerial method towards resolving conflicts. Their second choice (31.4%) focused on the performance on the part of the school principals' role as a mediator. Their third option was the use of power derived from the principals' managerial position (14.5%). The fourth option was about avoiding involvement (11.5%). A fifth option displayed the support towards teachers in taking initiatives (9.0%) and the sixth (last) option appeared to be the pretense on the part of the school principals that nothing was happening (5.0%).

As regards the school principals' responses to the same question, their attitudes and hierarchical evaluation of the methods used for managing conflicts due to operational reasons were diversified. 21.76% of the school principals answered this question and 40.5% of them chose the meetings of the teaching staff as the first option, and the support towards teachers taking the

initiative as the second one (37.8%). The other methods for conflict management appeared to have been chosen with minor percentages as a first option.

The question "If the reasons are personal, evaluate hierarchically (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.) the following conditions as causes of conflict incidents in the school working environment" was replied by the 10.6% of the teachers and their answers were varying. The parameter with the highest percentage as a first preference was the poor communication between the members of the school community (24.0%). The individual differences amongst the members of the school were appeared to be their second preference (21.9%), whereas 16.5% considered the negative school climate as a primary cause of conflict. Furthermore, 11.5% of the teachers reported the repetitive absences of the teachers as the primary cause of conflict incidents at school and, finally, 10.8% reported the lack of cohesion within the school community as the primary reason causing conflicts.

The same question was answered by 74 school principals (21.76%) and most of them focused on the incoherence of the school community (23%). The second choice appeared to be the continual movement of teachers (20.3%) followed then by the poor communication amongst the members of the school (14.9%). Finally, 12.2% of the school principals considered the teachers' inability to cooperate as the primary cause of conflicts and 10.8% the negative school climate.

The question "In what ways does the principal of the school deal with conflicts due to personal reasons (evaluate hierarchically: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.)?" was answered by the 10.5% of the teachers. The effort to resolve the disputes by mutual agreement of the parties involved appeared to have taken the first position in the ranking (59.6%). Then the way the principals were taking into consideration the efforts to approach the staff was underlined by the 16.2% of the teachers and the avoidance of imposing their opinion by the 16% of them. In contrast to this last finding, the imposition of the principals' opinion came next (12.1%), whereas the support towards teachers undertaking the initiative appeared to be the last choice (5.3%).

On the principals' side, most of their first preferences focused on avoiding the imposition of their viewpoints (60.8%). Then it followed the way the principals were taking into consideration the efforts to approach the staff (17.6%) and the support towards teachers undertaking the initiative (12.2%). The effort to resolve the disputes by a mutual agreement of the parties involved was chosen by the 9.5% of the principals. On the other hand, the imposition of the principals' opinion as a manner of conflict management did not get the first preference in their answers.

The question "Do you believe that the conflicts in the school environment adversely affect the efficient operation of the school unit?" was replied by the 80.3% of the teachers. Out of these, 2.3% responded "never", 11.8% answered "rarely", 34.2% responded "sometimes", 33.8% "often" and 17.8% "very often".

These findings along with the gender of the surveyed teachers (question 3) revealed that there was a correlation between the two variables, since  $X^2$  (11.633;  $p = 0.020$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0.106) were statistically significant. Specifically, the correlation was positive; this means that the female teachers believe stronger than their male counterparts that the frequent occurrence of conflict incidents at school has got a negative effect upon the educational process. Furthermore, in relation to the total years of service in public education, it was found that there was a positive correlation between the two variables, since both  $X^2$  (26.433;  $p = 0.048$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0.213) were statistically significant. This implies that the teachers

with more years of teaching experience find conflicts in the school work environment less negative.

Finally, regarding age, it was found that there was a positive correlation between the two variables, since both  $X^2$  (26.917;  $p = 0.008$ ) and the coefficient of Spearman test (-0,129) were statistically significant. The older teachers get the less negative they consider the effects of conflicts upon the educational process.

Regarding the same question, on the part of the principals, 37.4% of them replied that the conflicts at school environment "often" affected negatively the efficient operation of the school unit. 25.35% of the respondents replied that the effective functioning of the school was "sometimes" affected negatively and the 18.5% claimed that school operation was "very often" affected negatively. In contrast to the statistically significant correlations, which were emerged by the teachers' answers, the principals' responses to this question were not correlated significantly with the independent variables.

The question "If your answer is "often" or "very often", what conditions or operating parameters of the school unit are mostly affected (evaluate hierarchically: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.)?" was answered by the 45.5% of the teachers and their answers about the malfunctions that conflict incidents were causing to school were varying. The majority of teachers (53.2%) put the problem on the communication and collaboration issues among teachers as their first choice. Then, 34.5% underlined the climate of the school. The remaining parameters obtained relatively lower scores at first preferences (e.g.: the status of the school in the local community (4.5%), the pedagogical dimension of the role of the teachers (4.3%), the behavior of students (4.2%), the educational process (2.5%), and the organization of school events (1.3%)).

The same question was answered by the 56.47% of the school principals, and the first two places of the hierarchical ranking displayed the same parameters but in a reverse order. 46.9% of them prioritized the climate of the school as the first condition affected by conflict incidents; 38.5% focused on the teachers' communication and collaboration. Even in the responses of the school principals the remaining parameters obtained relatively lower first preferences (e.g.: the status of the school in the local community (4.7%), the educational process (4.2%), the pedagogical dimension of the role of teachers (3.6%)).

The question "Do you believe that the conflicts in the school work environment influence the effective operation of the school unit positively?" was replied by the 92.3% of the teachers. Out of them, 30.6% answered "never", 33.6% answered "rarely", 25.8% responded "sometimes", 8.4% responded "often" and 1.6% "very often". The same question was replied by the 90% of the school principals. Out of those, 22.4% responded "never", 31.8% "rarely", 25.3% "sometimes", 9.7% "often" and the 0.9% "very often".

The question "If your answer is "often" or "very often" what conditions are mostly affected (evaluate hierarchically: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, etc.)?" was replied by the 8.2% of the teachers. The top three choices indicated minor discrepancies between them. Most of their first preferences (26.3%) were gathered upon staff unity followed by the reduction of arbitrariness at a rate of 25.9% as well as by the identification and provision of solutions (23.2%). Then they underlined the fruitful dialogue and the investigation of new horizons (14.1%), the promotion of creativity (11.4%), the redefinition of relations (8.3%) and the improvement of the educational process (5.0%).

The same question was answered by the 11.7% of the school principals. Their answers differed from those of teachers regarding their first preferences, whereas they converged with respect to

their second and third preferences. The 26.3% of them placed the fruitful dialogue and the investigation of new horizons as their first preference, followed, with slight variations, by the reduction of arbitrariness (21.1%) and the identification and provision of solutions (18.4%). The promotion of creativity (10.5%), the unity of the staff (10.5%) and the improvement of the teaching process (7.9%) were the next choices in the hierarchical order.

In the question "To what extent do you think that the following factors would help towards the greatest possible elimination of conflicts at school?", the teachers' answers were dispersed in all parameters with several of them gathering many preferences to the indications of "much" and "very much". Specifically, most preferences were found in the parameter about the training upon conflict management not only for the managerial staff and the principals but also for the teachers (75.2%). After that, in a descending order, we received the redefinition and the distinctiveness of the roles of school principals and the teaching staff (e.g.: power, responsibilities, duties) (73.3%), the formation of an operational regulation for school functioning (67.5%), the improvement of technical infrastructure (59.25%), the allocation of more resources by the state (e.g.: funds, information, etc.) (59.0%), the stability of the teaching staff (55.6%), and the increase of school autonomy (49.8%).

The same question was replied by the principals who placed the same parameter at the top of their preferences, since the training of both principals and teachers on conflict management gathered the highest percentage (72%) with the indications of "much" and "very much". Then the formation of an operational regulation for school functioning (65.3%) and the redefinition and the distinctiveness of the roles of school principals and the teaching staff (e.g.: power, duties, responsibilities) (62.6%) were indicated by the respondents. The stability of the teaching staff was coming next (51.5%) and after that the allocation of more resources by the state (e.g.: funds, information, etc.) (47.65%), the improvement of technical infrastructure (46.7%) and the increase of school autonomy (40.3%).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Taking into consideration the role of good interpersonal relationships, as they are shaped on the basis of interactive communication among the members of the school units, as well as the sufficient school leadership and how all these affect the quality of education (Menon & Christou, 2002; Koula, 2011), the creation of a favorable work environment should be primary concern of school leadership. The prerequisite towards achieving this objective is, among other things (e.g.: the realistic organization of school resources, etc.), the proper management of conflicts in the work environment of the school unit.

Based on the research data of this study and regarding the demographic and profile characteristics of the surveyed teachers and principals, a relevant correlation between the participants was found in relation to the school status and the region. Regarding gender, the correlation between the participating teachers and principals is presented in a reversed way. As regards the age of teachers and principals, the highest rate of them is displayed in the same group age (from 41 to 50 years), but then the highest rate appears reversed, since, on the one hand, many of the principals are up to 50 years old and, on the other, the teachers are mostly under 40.

With respect to the total years of their service in education, the highest rates appear to be reversed too. Regarding the marital status of the participants, the rates have shown a correlation.

Nevertheless, the percentage of the principals who were married is significantly higher than the corresponding percentage of the teachers. With respect to the University qualifications, except of the basic degree, the highest rates are relatively equivalent, since a great deal of them appear to have attended training courses but a few have got either a Master's or a Ph.D. degree.

As concerns the frequency of conflict incidents in the school environment, one out of three respondents claimed that conflicts amongst the teaching staff of schools are observed either *very often* or *sometimes*. Principals' responses are also similar. This result is not surprising as other studies (Saitis et al., 1996; Paraskevopoulos, 2008) have showed that conflicts appear to be a common phenomenon in schools nowadays.

As regards the relationship between the frequency of conflicts and the number of teachers with a permanent position status at schools, our research (both in relation to the teachers' answers and compared with those of the principals) indicated that when the size of the school increases (i.e.: the number of teachers with a permanent position status) the number of conflicts in the work environment increases as well. This result is expected as the coexistence of more teachers in the same work environment increases the chances to get more friction due to interpersonal factors (e.g.: teachers' heterogeneity, diversity of individual characteristics, opposing needs and values, etc.) and also due to factors relating to the institutional framework (e.g.: lack of operational regulations for effective school functioning). Moreover, as it has been argued in other studies (Shaw, 1981; Smith et al. 1994), the size of a group introduces diversity and the diversity itself can have conflicting results.

Another important finding of our research, is that, according to the teachers' views, primary schools in urban areas in Greece have frequent friction amongst the members of the school community in comparison to other schools in suburban and rural areas. Perhaps, the explanation to this issue is the fact that the vast majority of small and middle schools are located in rural and suburban areas (Papastamatis, 1998; Saitis, 2000).

On the other hand, the correlations relating to the answers of the principals indicate that where female principals are serving at schools, it is less likely for conflicts to occur. The same indication seems to apply to schools where the principals serve for several years in education.

In relation to the reasons that cause conflicts in the school environment, our data showed that the 83.60% of the teachers and the 83.78% of the school principals believe that the reasons of conflicts at schools are not unilaterally identified within official or just personal reasons, but they appear in a combination of them. This result, which indicates the difficulty in isolating the causes within one of the two categories of conflicts, can be attributed to the fact that the sources of conflicts are overlapping and present features which can be found in more than one reasons (Saiti and Saitis, 2012: 306).

According to the views of teachers and on the basis of their prioritization, the most important factors causing conflicts, due to official purposes in the workplace of school environment, are as follows: the distribution of classes, the fulfillment of the school timetable, the lack of school operational regulations, the distribution of pupils in other classes, when occasionally some teachers are absent, the responsibility for organizing school events, the delegation of teachers-on duty, the delegation of teaching responsibilities and the introduction and application of innovations at schools.

According to the principals' views, the major factors causing conflicts for official reasons are ranked as follows: the distribution of classes, the lack of operational regulation of the school and



the delegation for organizing events at school. The results are in accordance with other relevant research studies (Saitis, 1997; Pantopoulou, 2010; Toziou, 2012) and can be attributed to the lack of an organizational plan (Bourandas, 2001; Saitis, 2008).

Regarding the management of conflicts caused by operational-official reasons, the data on the part of the teachers revealed the following ranking: the decision of the teaching staff, the mediation of the male or female principals, the use of the principals' power, the avoidance technique, the responsibility for an initiative on behalf of a teacher and, finally, the pretense of the principals that "nothing is happening".

From the perspective of the school principals, their first option appears to be the meetings of the teaching staff and their second option the support in taking initiatives from teachers. The other modes show minor preferences as first choices for conflicts management. This finding indicates that the male and female principals of the elementary schools in our country primarily use conventional ways to manage conflicts and secondly make use of enforcement and prevention. The above finding, which is consistent with the results of other surveys (Paraskevopoulos, 2008; Tekos & Iordanides, 2011), implies that the school principals of primary education adopt an attitude towards conflicts, which indicates that they are more interested than teachers in reducing tension and resentment from an episode of conflict. In another study (Adams, 1990) it has been argued that the principals who make use of avoidance and enforcement techniques increase the tension and the friction in the workplace, instead of decreasing it.

On the other hand, the choice of a compromising strategy may be regarded as "retreat" (Everard & Morris, 1999) and as "inability or unwillingness" of the principals to commit themselves and take initiatives (Lippit, 1982), because this might damage their relations with their colleagues (Tekos & Iordanides, 2011).

Regarding the conflicts that occur due to personal reasons, our research data showed, according to teachers' ranking, the following causes: the poor communication amongst the teachers, the individual differences among the members of the school, the negative school climate, the absences of the teachers, the lack of cohesion within the school community, the failure of cooperation amongst the teachers, the constant movement of teachers from one school to another, the job stress and the poor cooperation between teachers and the school's principal. The principals, on the contrary, concentrate mostly on the inconsistencies of the school community as their first preferences, the constant movement of teachers (the principals have placed this parameter higher than the teachers), the poor communication amongst the members of the school, the failure of cooperation amongst teachers and the negative school climate. According to these figures, poor communication and individual differences among teachers are the most important causes for conflict incidents in the work environment of the school.

This result is not surprising, as poor communication between team members with individual differences (e.g.: different perceptions, values, needs, knowledge, etc.) is expected to hinder the cooperation and to lead to conflicts. This view is also supported by the findings of other relevant studies (Saitis et al. 1996; Paraskevopoulos, 2008; Kula 2011; Toziou, 2012). According to them, the miscommunication impedes collaboration of team members and as a result it disrupts the school climate and leads to frictions.

Furthermore, the continuous movement of the teachers, which is highly placed in principals' preferences, confirms that it inhibits decision-making processes of the teaching staff (Darra et al. 2010: 64) and affects important parameters for the operation of the school, such as the need for

developing a collaborative spirit, the sense of brotherhood and solidarity among the teachers in the same school unit, etc.

Regarding the role of the male or female principals in the management of conflicts due to personal reasons, the surveyed teachers responded that their principals resolve disputes, according to the following ranking: with mutual agreement of the involved members (59.6%), with the consideration of the approaches of the others (16.2%), by avoiding to impose their own terms (16.0%), by imposing their own terms (12.1%) and by relying on the initiatives of some teachers of the staff (5.3%).

From the perspective of the principals, most of their first preferences are gathered round the avoidance of imposing their point of view (60.8%), considering the others' approaches (17.6%), the support of the initiative of another teacher (12.2%), and the attempt to resolve the dispute by mutual agreement of the parties involved (9.5%). It is worth noting that this last preference attracted most of the first choices of the teachers, whereas the imposition of the principals' opinion as a manner of conflict management did not obtain the first preference in their responses.

Based on these results, we can claim that the use of power can be the last solution. This finding, which is in agreement with other relevant studies (Saitis et al. 1996; Tekos & Iordanides, 2011), not only demonstrates the importance of school leadership in the conflict management, but also emphasizes the establishment of democratic participatory governance in a modern school.

Nevertheless, the mediation technique can be interpreted as an inability or unwillingness from the part of the principals to commit themselves and take initiatives (Lippit, 1982). On the other hand, the principal of a school unit, which functions in the context of a centralized administrative and management system, has got a limited decision-making power, and he/she is expected to adopt this style of managing conflicts (Tekos & Iordanides, 2011: 211).

Regarding the consequences of the conflict incidents, the majority of teachers (51.6%) and principals (55.9%) believe that conflicts affect negatively the efficient operation of schools at the rate from *very often* to *often*. This result is expected as "the frequent occurrence of disputes between members of the school unit undermines most of their activities and does not allow them to contribute enthusiastically towards an effort to improve school" (Saiti & Saitis, 2012: 294).

As regards the correlation between teachers' gender and the consequences of conflicts in school, female teachers consider as more important the fact that the more frequent the conflicts in school the more negative the effects on the educational process in comparison with their male counterparts. An explanation of this difference may be found on the fact that female teachers are more emotional, sensitive and cooperative compared to their male counterparts.

Additionally, it can be pointed out that the years of teaching in public education affect the attitudes towards conflicts, since - according to our research data - with the increase of teaching years the teachers consider conflicts in their workplace as less negative. The "compromising" attitude of the "older" teachers may be due to their teaching experience, which has made them more dispassionate and wiser, so that the younger members of the school community can "learn" from them and work towards the creation of a better school climate. This view is supported by the findings of a relevant study, according to which "the older teachers appear in the later years of their career to turn into more resolute and managing situations" (Paraskevopoulos, 2008: 219). Even more interesting is the finding, according to which teachers consider the effects of conflicts to be less negative for the educational process as their age is being increased. Perhaps the

explanation to this point will be the same with that mentioned above, if it is accepted that the years of teachers' service at school are related – to some extent – with the age. In contrast to the statistically significant correlations revealed from the teachers' answers, the principals' responses to this question, do not correlate significantly with the relevant independent variables. As far the parameters of the operation of the school unit affected by conflicts are concerned, the sample of the teachers involved in the research survey has indicated that the communication and collaboration amongst the members of the school unit is their first preference in the ranking (53.2%) followed by the climate in the school unit (34.5%), the status of the school in the local community (4.5%), the pedagogical dimension of the role of the teacher (4.3%), the behavior of the pupils (4.2%), the educational procedure (2.5%) and the organization of school events (1.3%). The same question was answered by the sample of the principals who placed the climate of the school unit first in their ranking (46.9%), followed by the communication and collaboration among the teachers (38.5%). Moreover, the remaining parameters indicated by the responses of the principals obtained relatively low rates as first preferences. For example, the status of the school in the local community appeared at a rate of 4.7%, the educational process at a rate of 4.2% and the pedagogical dimension of the role of the teachers at a rate of 3.6%. These findings reflect the accepted views arising from the literature review (Dubrin, 1998; Koontz & O'Donnell, 1983; Kula, 2011; Saiti & Saitis, 2012, etc.). According to them, the good interpersonal relations depend on the communication, the positive school climate and the effective operation of the school unit.

Regarding the positive effects of conflicts at the school workplace, the survey showed that a small percentage of the participating teachers (10%) and a similar percentage of the principals (10.6%) feel that conflict processes positively affect the operation of the school unit from *very often* to *often*. Additionally, it has been indicated that the most important parameters on the part of the teachers that have focused upon the positive effects of conflicts at school, appear as follows: the unity of the staff (26.3%), the avoidance of arbitrariness (25%), the identification and the provision of solutions (23.2%), a fruitful dialogue (14.1%), the promotion of creativity (11.4%), the redefinition of relations (8.3%) and the improvement of the educational process (5%).

The principals' responses differ from the teachers' ones as concerns the first preference, whereas they are similar in relation to the second and third preferences. The 26.3% of the sample placed their first preference on a fruitful dialogue and the broadening of the horizons, followed by the reduction of arbitrariness (21.1%) and the identification and the provision of solutions (18.4%). Then, the promotion of creativity (10.5%), the unity of the staff (10.5%) and the improvement of the educational / teaching process (7.9%) follow. This result is not surprising because, based on the literature on the topic, the current administrative discourse underlines the proper management of conflicts and indicates that it increases creativity. However, this process appears to be complex and laborious enough, and its outcomes depend on many factors, such as the skills of the school principal, the maturity of the teachers, the type of conflicts, etc.

Regarding the factors that can help minimize conflicts at schools, the sample of the teachers showed that the principals' training in conflict management is the most important factor (75.2%), followed by the redefinition and the distinctiveness of the roles of school principals and the teaching staff (73.3%), the formation of an operational regulation for school functioning (67.5%), the allocation of more resources by the state (59.4%), the improvement of the infrastructure (59.2%), the stability of the teaching staff (54.6%) and the increase of school autonomy (49.8%).

The same question was answered by the principals, who prioritized the same parameter at the top of their preferences, since the training of both the school principals and the teachers in conflict management gathers a high rate of 72% in the indications "much" and "very much". The preferences of the teachers get the third place and they are concerned with the formation of operational regulations for the school function (65.3%) and the redefinition and distinctiveness of the roles of principals and teachers (e.g.: power, duties, responsibilities etc.) (62.6%). Then, the stability of the teaching staff (51.5%), the allocation of more resources by the state (e.g.: money, information, etc.) (47.65%), the improvement of infrastructure (46.7%) and the increase of school autonomy (40.3%) are coming in a descending order.

Furthermore, data analysis revealed that the training of the principals in the management of human sources and the organization of the school operational issues are the main factors that can minimize conflicts in the work environment of schools. In fact, the vast majority of male and female school principals has not taught even the basic elements of educational administration (Zavlanos, 1981; Saitis, 1997; Typas, 1999; Saitis & Michopoulos, 2005). Additionally, as it has been supported in another study carried out in Greece, "in our country... the curricula that deal with educational administration issues are limited and do not offer specialized knowledge and practical skills on the topic" (Saitis & Saitis, 2012: 65). Secondly, as it has already been mentioned, the main sources of conflicts that occur in the school workplace are concerned with the organizational weaknesses, since the existing education legislation does not clearly regulate aspects of the school life (Saitis et al. 1996).

In conclusion, based on the results of our research data and recognizing that the frequent occurrence of disputes amongst the members of a school unit undermines much of their activity, we believe that the conflicts at school must be effectively addressed. It is, therefore, necessary, firstly to explore strategies of training for both the school principals and the teachers upon issues of organizational behavior and, secondly, to initiate the formation of constructive internal regulations in order to ensure the efficient operation of the schools in Greece. The findings of this research study could be a promising contribution to the discussion on the topic in the international context. The overall task remains the effective function of the school and its empowerment.

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