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THE HEADMASTER'S REGULATION OF SCHOOL CONFLICTS

Abstract

The present work researches the types as well as the frequency of conflicts occurring in a school unit of Secondary Education. Furthermore, it examines the ways chosen by the school Headmasters to regulate the various types of conflicts presented in their school.

The types of conflicts examined are divided into interpersonal conflicts, conflicts between teams and conflicts between individuals and teams (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Bondesio, 1992; Zablanos, 1987; Hanson, 1996; Plocharczyk, 2007; Owens, 2001; Saitis, 1994).

Regarding the methods of conflict settlement some techniques were investigated; avoidance - technique of ignoring, smoothing over - technique of separation, compromise - technique of compromise, competition - use of authority and the technique of problems resolution - technique of creating higher objectives (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Everard & Morris, 1999; Hakvoort, 2010; Hanson, 1996; Kantas, 2009).

In order to complete the survey a statistical review was carried out concerning the subjects' responses in accordance with their sex, age, years of service in public education, additional studies, experience in a managerial position at school, training in management and in managing conflicts and finally the type of school they direct.

The survey was conducted in May 2010 in Western Attica and attended by all the Headmasters of Secondary schools, namely High School, Lyceum, Vocational Lyceum (EPAL) and Technical School (EPAS) in the region. The type of the survey was a review, the methodological tool was a questionnaire and the results were processed with the program SPSS 17.0.

The results showed that three types of conflicts are very often perceived as factors of conflict while two methods are very often selected to settle conflicts.

Keywords: school, conflicts, types of conflicts, methods of conflict settlement

Introduction

The conflict can be defined as an interactive process which comes up when there is incompatibility among social institutions (Rahim, 1992), but also as the disagreement between two or more individuals or groups for many reasons (Owens, 2001). Conflict occurs when needs, impulses and desires do not correspond. It is a notion which includes the interaction between individual and society as well as among social groups and which therefore influences the relations between groups and individuals in positive or negative way (Argon, 2009).

Conflict is a very frequent phenomenon in educational institutions. It is estimated that t headmasters spend almost 20% of their time for confrontation or resolution of some kind of conflict (Kantas, 2009). The subject of "conflicts" in the educational institutions and their settlement is also an important element of their organizational behavior and deals with effective decision making and their operational efficiency (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008).

Conflicts in educational institutions can have negative results as they divert energy from the main work, wipe out the team morale, create rivalry between individuals and teams, reinforce differences, hinder collaboration, create mistrust and suspicion and deteriorate productivity (Papastamatis, 2002).

However, conflict can be a source for creativity and can contribute on the effective running of the educational institution. More specifically, it evokes the creation of new subjects for discussion and the explanation of a subject matter, increases the participation of people who are interested, improves the quality of resolution of the problems, offers more spontaneity in discussion, is useful for managing change and improves interpersonal relations (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008).

Taking all these parameters under consideration, the educational leader ought not to pursue the elimination of every conflict but to try the settle conflicts down, exploit the creative ones and eliminate the disastrous ones (Bondesio, 1992). Therefore, it is considered essential for the educational leader to develop the proper skills to handle, divert or work out conflicts, having at the same time clear facts concerning the causes of conflict(s) in the institution, given that the

knowledge of the causes is the most effective way of handling the conflict because it surely helps in the effort of eliminating it (Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Conflicts in educational institutions can be classified in the following three categories:

- a. **Interpersonal conflicts.** These conflicts occur when there is a gap between members of the same team, e.g. between teachers of the same school. This type of conflict, when it actually happens between powerful individuals of the school community, i.e. between the headmaster and an informal leader, is very disastrous for the coherence in the organization of the school unit.
- b. **Intergroup conflicts.** These conflicts occur among groups, like for example between specialized teachers and general education teachers in a primary school, or between professors and parents, or between teachers and students.
- c. **Conflicts between individuals and groups.** In this category, probable conflicts arise between one teacher and the teachers' community, or between a teacher and the parents' community (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Zablanos, 1987; Hanson, 1996; Plocharczyk, 2007; Owens, 2001; Saitis, 1994).

It is often difficult to distinguish between the above categories of conflicts, as types of conflicts tend to be linked and evolve. They may spring out from a certain category and end in another. The same applies to the categorization of causes from which the conflicts stem and especially from their subdivisions (Bondesio, 1992). One of the acceptable classifications regards that the possible causes of such a conflict, which break out in an educational institution, can be related to one or more of the following factors: communication problems, organizational problems, human factors, restricted finances, team contrasts, incompatibility of aims, insecurity and differentiations of wages and rewards (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Banner & Cagne 1995; Dean 1999; Kantas, 2009; Papastamatis, 2002).

The most complete model for the procedure of resolving conflicts is the one which Thomas (1992) presented and is based on a high degree on the theory of logical action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The incident of conflict occurs when one part feels that the other part affects his/her benefits after an incident makes this threat of benefits apparent. This awareness leads to specific thoughts and feelings concerning this emerging conflict, and the feasible ways of settlement. Initially the individual has to realize what exactly happens and in which way it can be worked out. When he/she comes up with a type of interpretation, some possible ways of settlement emerge and for each one of them, each person shapes a general idea concerning the level which satisfies his/her own benefits, or the benefits of the other part, or the benefits of both parts, or leads to an

insufficient solution, or dead end. The same frame includes the interpretation which the individual gives for the conflict.

In turn, thoughts and feelings create specific intentions regarding the handling of the conflict. Intentions have to do with the decisions on a series of future actions which aren't always explained in terms of behavior but they in total shape behavior. In the conflict procedure, the finding/evaluation of intentions of the other part of the conflict has the dominant role. Therefore, two critical behavioral dimensions construct the way in which the person is aware of the conflict (Kantas, 2009; Owens, 2001):

1. Cooperation, effort to satisfy the interests of the other party,
2. Confidence/security, effort to satisfy his/her own needs.

In the diagnosis of conflict, as it has been experienced by the interested parties, the main points is not just a matter of cooperation or professional action, but a matter where cooperation can seem strictly as the sacrifice of someone's needs. The survey of the bibliography reveals that there are five strategies of approaching an institutional conflict (Kantas, 2009) which also apply in the educational institutions (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Everard & Morris, 2009):

1. Competition (fight), is characterized by absolute confidence and the effort to satisfy our own benefits, totally ignoring the benefits of the other party.
2. Facilitation (adaptation), the smoothing out of the problems, is characterized by the effort to satisfy the needs of the other part of the conflict, having complete lack of confidence and aggressiveness regarding personal benefits.
3. Compromise (exchange, share of "pain", bargaining), as a technique involves an average degree of confidence and cooperation. There is an effort to satisfy the benefits of both parties, not entirely, because a certain amount of sacrifice is needed from both parties.
4. Resolution of problems (cooperation, cooperative attitude), is a technique of dealing with a conflict using a high degree of both dimensions: desire for total satisfaction of the aims of both parties, or for developing common views/attitudes.
5. Avoidance (ignorance), is characterized by complete indifference of the benefits of both parties and the individual effort not to get involved in the whole process.

The final result of each conflict, according to the theoretical model of Thomas (1992), can be the discovery of a real solution which satisfies to every participant, or it may be that the participants will be directed towards a turbulent relationship, or concentrate on the false conflicts which weren't recognised earlier and confront them. On the other hand, if conflicts are only

smoothed and not worked out, the false conditions of conflict would deteriorate and explode in a worse form, where, of course, the procedure of conflict will go through the same or similar stages.

Methodology of the Survey

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the research was to survey the types of conflicts which appear in the school units of West Attica as well as the ways of settlement by the Headmasters. The questions which were posed were:

- Which types of conflicts do the Headmasters of the West Attica schools face and to which degree?
- Which ways of conflict settlement do the Headmasters of West Attica schools use in the school units they run and to which degree?
- Are there differentiations in the ways of settlement of the conflicts which the headmasters of the West Attica schools use, in the school units they run, regarding the following variables: sex, age, previous working experience in public education, extra post studies, experience in managerial positions, further training in school management and on the administration of conflicts and the type of school they run?

Planning and Execution of Survey

The research was carried out on May 2010 in all the schools of Secondary Education of West Attica. It was a type of survey and the methodology tool used was the closed-end questionnaire. Before the main survey, a pilot survey was executed in which five headmasters of secondary schools joined in (Bell, 2001). Its aim was to check the clarity of the questions in the questionnaire. Taking into consideration the results of the pilot survey and the participants' observations, the questionnaire took its final form.

The questionnaires were personally handed out while respondents mailed them back when fully answered. Fifty three fully completed questionnaires were received, thus forming the main body of data for this survey. The data mining was performed with the SPSS 17.0 statistical software.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire included 24 closed-end type questions which covered three basic areas. The first consisted of 8 questions concerning the personal data of

participants (sex, age, total service period in public education, extra studies, years of service as a headmaster, further training in school management, further training in handling conflicts at school and the type of school they manage).

The second area covered 11 questions which concerned relevant types of conflicts appeared at schools. Four of them concerned interpersonal conflicts, 4 questions referred to inter-team conflicts and 3 concerned conflicts between individuals and groups.

The third area consisted of 5 questions concerning the relevant ways which are used in the settlement of conflicts arising in schools. The techniques that were researched were Avoidance – technique of ignorance, Calming down – smoothing out – technique of separation, Compromise – the technique of compromise, Competition – fight – the technique of authority, Problem solving – technique of setting higher goals.

The answers for the second and the third area were given marks in the fifth scale Likert index: 1 = Rarely, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Frequently, 4 = Often, 5 = Very Often.

The Survey Population

In the survey 37 men (69.8%) and 16 women (30.2%) fully answered the questionnaires. Of those, 3 (5.66%) were between 36 and 45 years old, 25 (47.17%) between 46 and 50 years old and 25 (47.17%) over 51 years old. From the participants 7 (13.21%) had 11 till 20 years of service in public education, 34 (64.15%) 21 to 30 years and 12 (22.64%) over 30 years. Regarding their educational status, 32 participants (61.20%) had only a B.A. degree, 16 (30.10%) were holders of Master or Phd, while 8(15.1%) had attended SELME(Training school for teachers of secondary education). Regarding managerial experience, 16 participants (30.19%) had less than 5 years, 15 (28.30%) 6 to 10 years, 16 (30.19%) 11 to 15 years, and 6 (11.32%) had more than 15 years.

Concerning special training on managing schools, 20 participants (37.74%) stated that they were trained, while 33 (62.26%) were not. Eleven participants (20.75%) had received specialized training in handling schools conflicts, while the remaining 42 (79.25%) had not.

Finally, 27 (50.94%) were managing some type of High School (general, athletic, evening), 15 (28.30) were managers in a Lyceum, 9 (16.98%) were heading Vocational Lyceum, and 2 (3.78%) Technical Schools.

Results

Types of conflicts

The answers of the participants in the survey regarding the types of conflicts they face in schools are presented in the following table:

Table 1					
Types of conflicts					
Conflict	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Between Teachers	53	1	3	1.47	0.696
Between One Teacher and One Student	53	1	4	2.45	0.932
Between One Teacher and One Parent	53	1	3	1.40	0.599
Between Two Students	53	1	5	2.47	1.250
Between Groups of Teachers	53	1	3	1.25	0.551
Between Teachers and Parents	53	1	2	1.23	0.423
Between Teachers and Students	53	1	4	1.75	0.853
Between Groups of Students	53	1	5	1.72	1.007
Between One Teacher and Community of					
Teachers	53	1	3	1.26	0.486
Between One Teacher and Community of Parents	53	1	2	1.06	0.233
Between One Teacher and the students of a Section or a Class	53	1	5	1.83	0.971
<i>Notes: n* number of participants SD* Standard Deviation</i>					

A quality interpretation of the results shows that the most frequent conflicts dealt with the survey participants are those between one teacher and one student and those between two students. On the other hand, conflicts between teachers and parents and between one teacher and the community of parents arise at a less frequent rate. These findings can be seen in the following frequency distribution graphs, one graph per type of conflict.

34 participants (64.15%) reported that they rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between teachers", 13 (24.53%) reported occasionally, and 6 (11.32%) reported frequently. No participant answered often or very often.

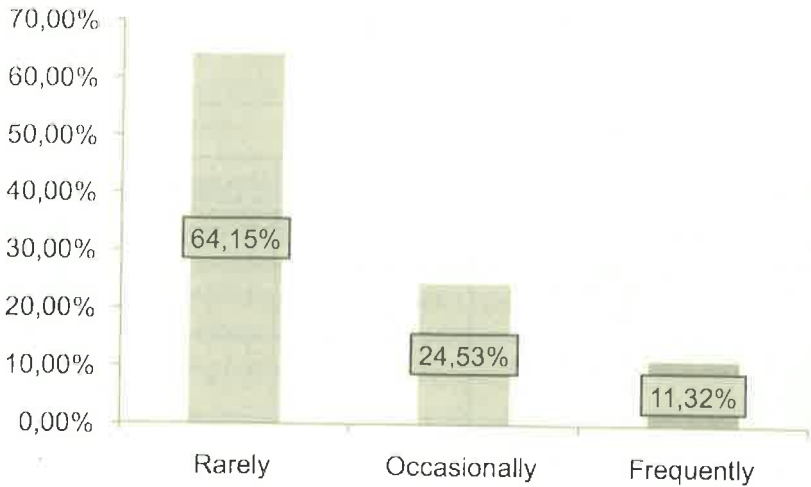


Diagram 1. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between teachers"

10 participants (18.87%) reported that rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between one teacher and one student", 15 (28.30%) reported occasionally, 22 (41.51%) reported frequently and 6 (11.32%) often. No participant answered very often.

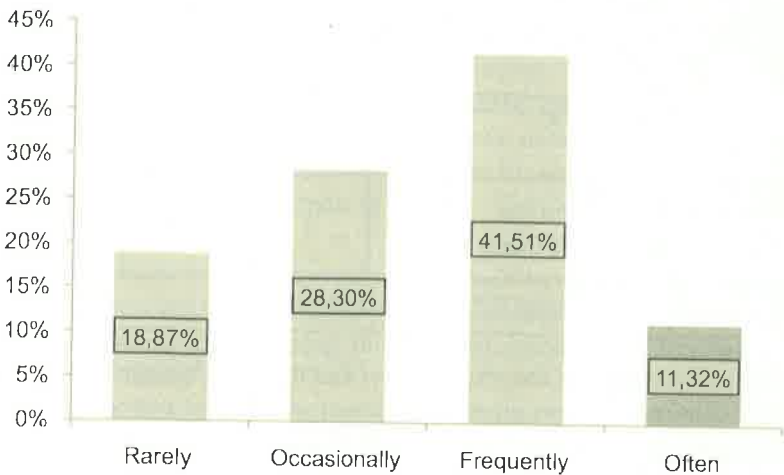


Diagram 2. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between one teacher and one student"

35 participants (66.04%) reported that rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between one teacher and one parent", 15 (28.30%) reported occasionally, and 3 (5.66%) reported frequently. No participant answered often or very often.

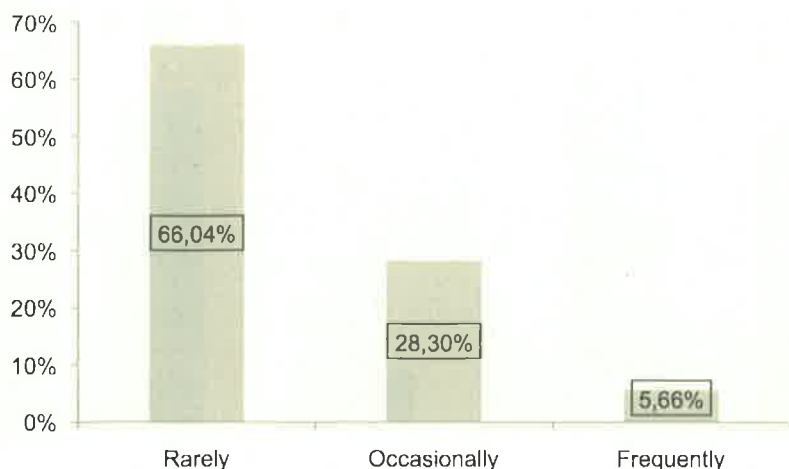


Diagram 3. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between one teacher and one parent"

17 participants (32.08%) reported that rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between two students", 8 (15.09%) reported occasionally, 17 (32.08%) reported frequently, 8 (15.09%) often and 3 (5.66%) very often.

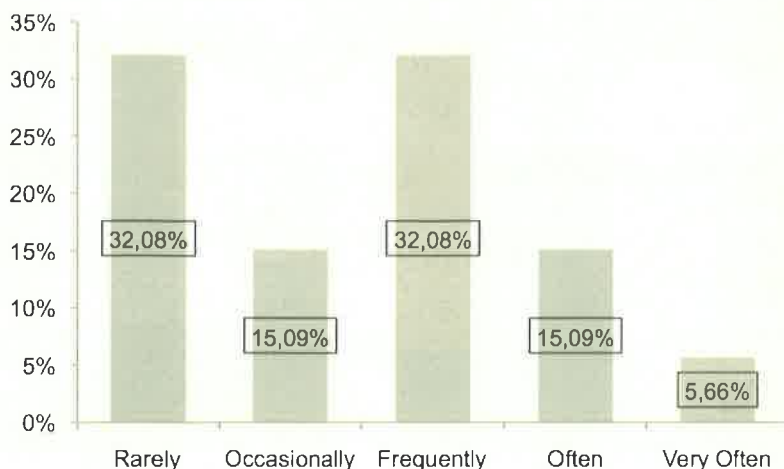


Diagram 4. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between two students"

43 participants (81.13%) reported that rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between groups of teachers"; 7 (13.21%) reported occasionally, and 3 (5.66%) reported frequently. No participant answered often or very often.

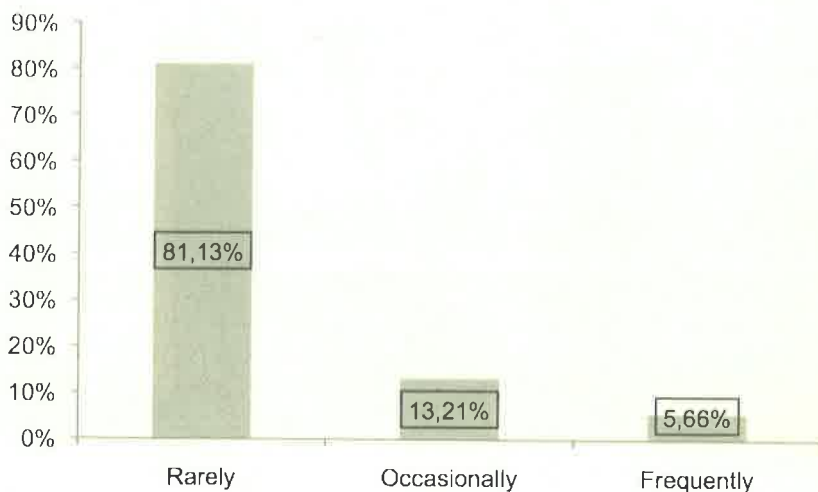


Diagram 5. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between groups of teachers"

41 participants (77.36%) reported that they rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between teachers and parents"; 12 (22.64%) reported occasionally. No participant answered frequently, often or very often.

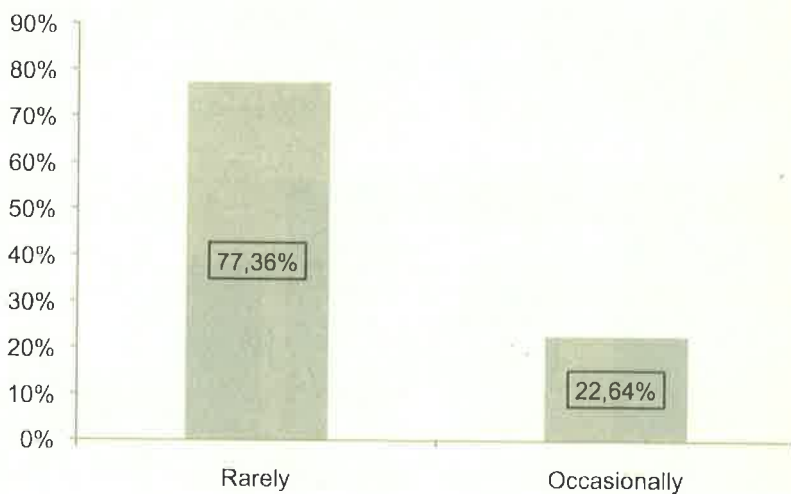


Diagram 6. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between teachers and parents"

26 participants (49.06%) reported that rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between teachers and students", 15 (28.30%) reported occasionally, 11 (20.75%) reported frequently and 1 (1.89%) often. No participant answered very often.

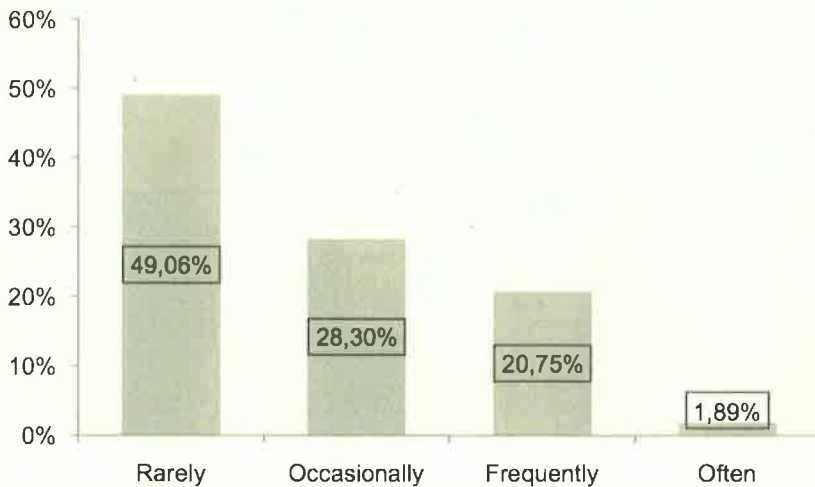


Diagram 7. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict teachers and students"

30 participants (56.06%) reported that they rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between groups of students", 13 (24.53%) reported occasionally, 6 (11.32%) reported frequently, 3 (5.66%) often and 1 (1.89%) very often.

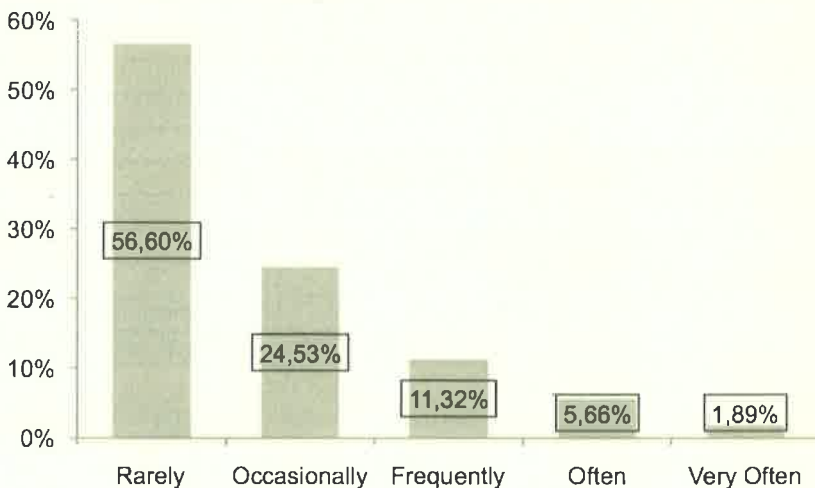


Diagram 8. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between groups of students"

40 participants (75.47%) reported that they rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between one teacher and the community of teachers", 12 (22.64%) reported occasionally and 1 (1.89%) reported frequently. No participant answered often or very often.

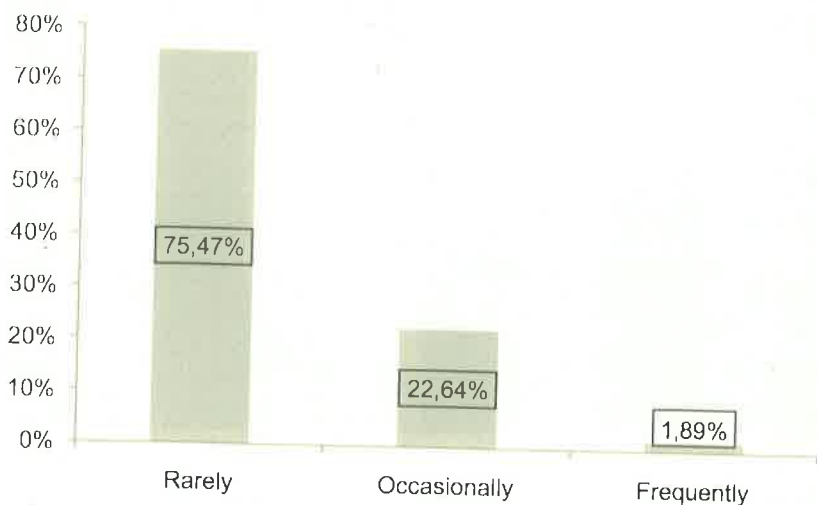


Diagram 9. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between one teacher and the community of teachers"

50 participants (94.34%) reported that they rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between one teacher and the community of parents", 3 (5.66%) reported occasionally. No participant answered frequently, often or very often.

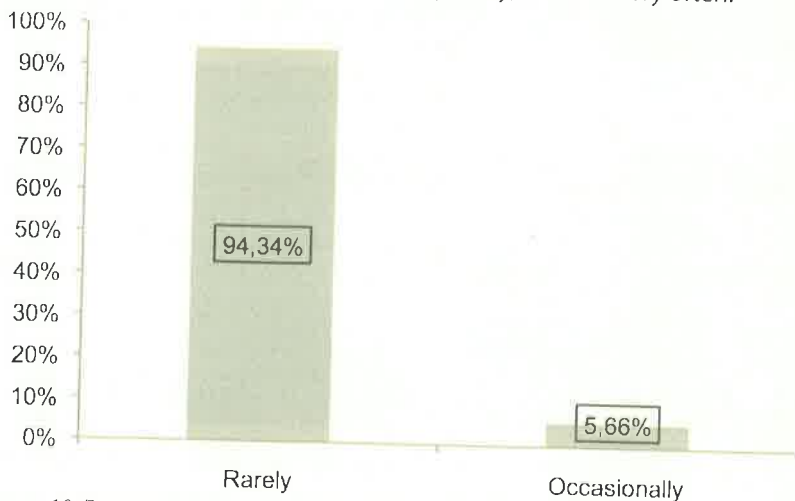


Diagram 10. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between one teacher and the community of parents"

20 participants (37.74%) reported that they rarely had to deal with "Conflicts between one teacher and a section/group of students", 26 (49.06%) reported occasionally, 4 (7.55%) reported frequently, 2 (3.77%) often and 1 (1.89%) very often.

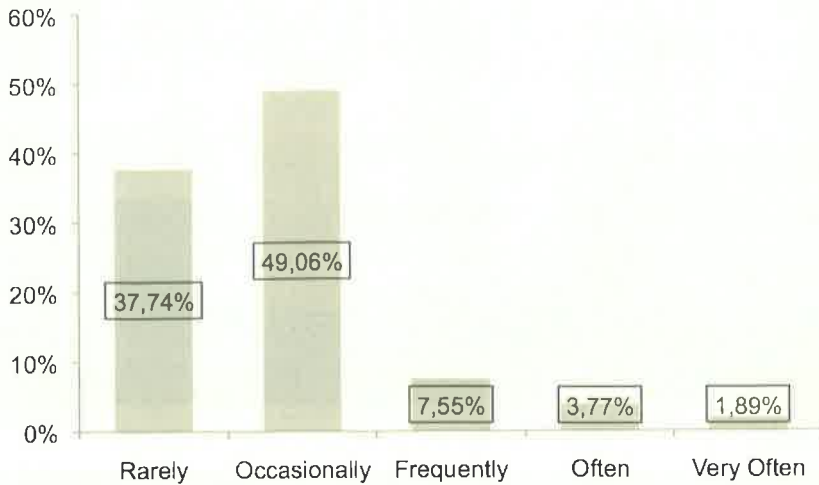


Diagram 11. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Conflict between one teacher and a section/group of students"

Ways to Resolve Conflicts

The answers of the participants in the survey regarding the preferred techniques used to handle conflicts arising in their schools are presented in the following table:

Table 2					
Techniques in managing conflicts					
Technique of:	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Ignorance	53	1	5	1.58	1.027
Separation	53	1	5	1.53	1.030
Compromise	53	1	5	3.23	1.339
Competition	53	1	5	2.21	1.291
Problem Resolution	53	1	5	4.11	1.031
Notes: n* number of participants SD* Standard Deviation					

A first reading of the results shows that the participants often or always adopt the techniques of problem resolution and compromise in dealing with conflicts in their professional environment. The techniques of ignorance, separation and competition were far less often adopted by those participants. The following diagrams depict in more detail the findings.

35 participants (66.04%) reported that they rarely used the "Technique of Ignorance", 11 (20.75%) reported occasionally, 3 (5.66%) reported frequently, 2 (3.77%) often and 2 (3.77%) very often.

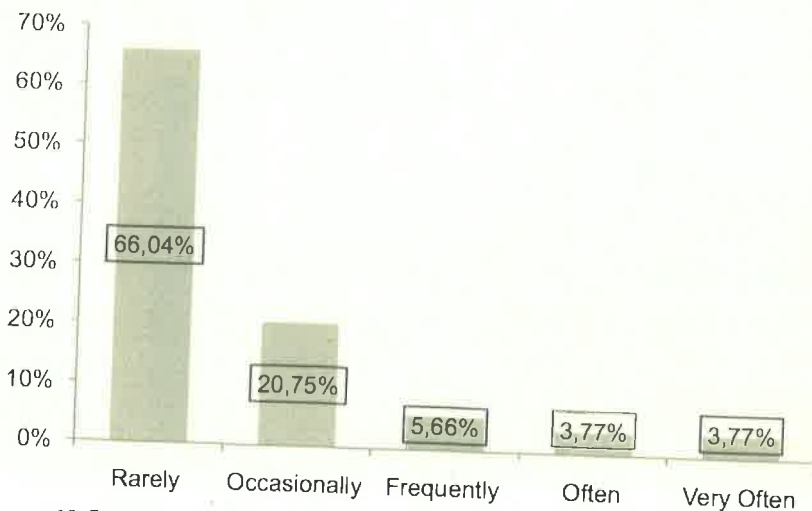


Diagram 12. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Technique of Ignorance"

39 participants (73.58%) reported that they rarely used the "Technique of Separation", 5 (9.43%) reported occasionally, 6 (11.32%) reported frequently, 1 (1.89%) often and 2 (3.77%) very often.

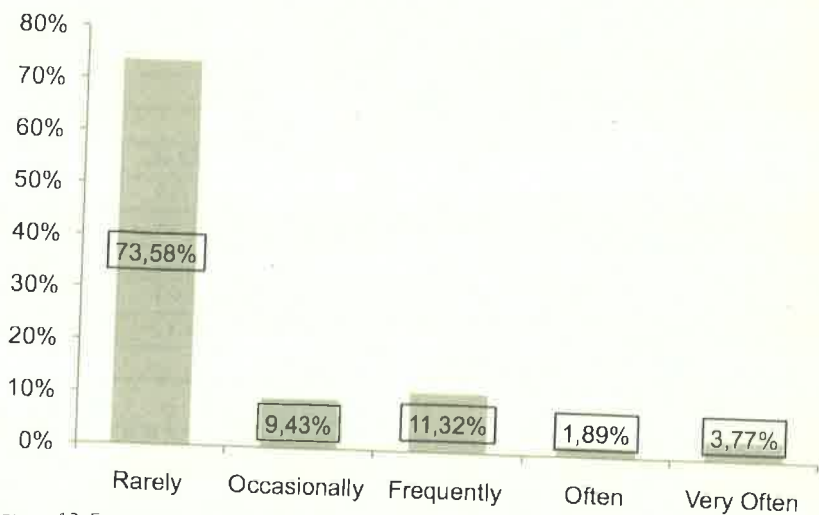


Diagram 13. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Technique of Separation"

9 participants (16.98%) reported that they rarely used the "Technique of Compromise", 4 (7.55%) reported occasionally, 17 (32.08%) reported frequently, 12 (22.64%) often and 11 (20.75%) very often.

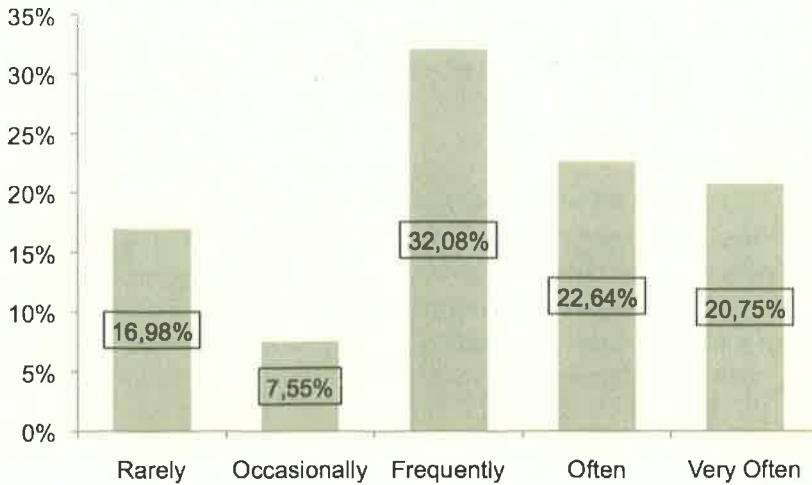


Diagram 14. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Technique of Compromise"

23 participants (43.40%) reported that they rarely used the "Technique of Competition", 10 (18.87%) reported occasionally, 8 (15.09%) reported frequently, 10 (18.87%) often and 2 (3.77%) very often.

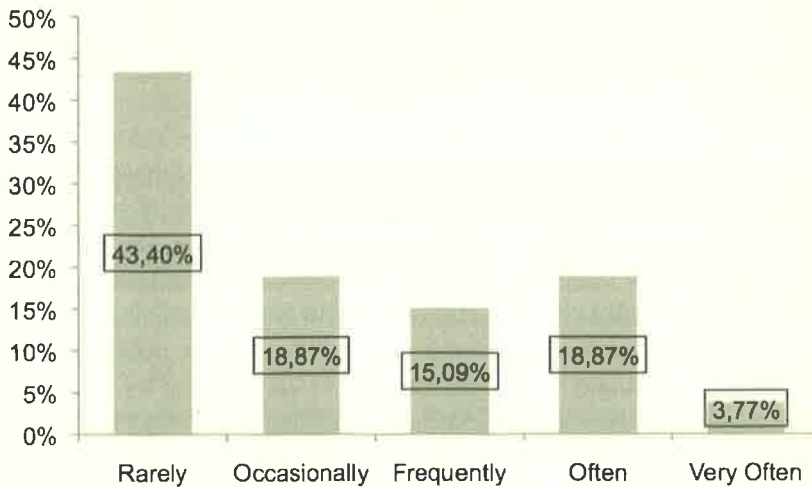


Diagram 15. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Technique of Competition"

2 participants (3.77%) reported that they rarely used the "Technique of Problem Solving", 1 (1.89%) reported occasionally, 10 (18.87%) reported frequently, 16 (30.19%) often and 24 (45.28%) very often.

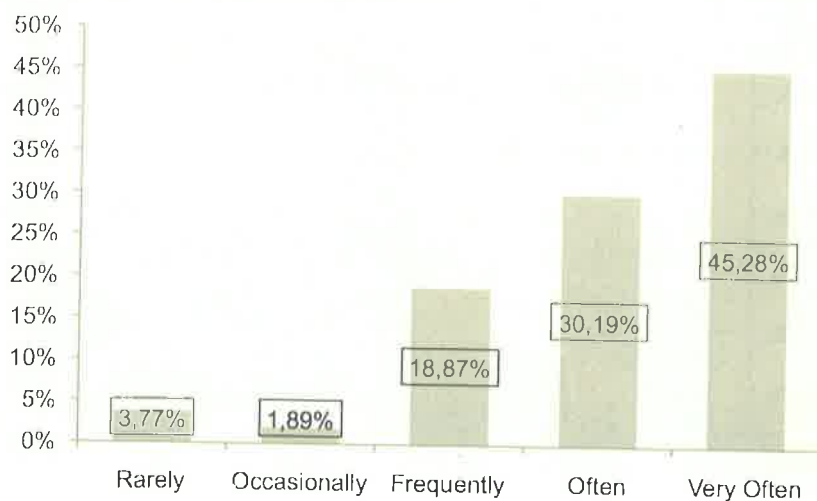


Diagram 16. Frequency distribution of answers regarding "Technique of Problem Solving"

Differentiations on the ways of settlement of the conflicts regarding 8 variables

In order to complete the study, the answers of the participants were statistically controlled, in relation to the following parameters: sex, age, years of serving at public education, extra post studies, experience as headmaster, training in school management and in handling conflicts, type of school under their management.

The results show that there was no differentiation in using the 5 methods of handling conflicts in relation to the parameters of sex, age, extra post studies and training in school management and in handling conflicts. Statistically important differentiations were identified on the parameters of years of serving at public education, experience as headmaster and type of school under management. More specifically, on the parameter years of serving at public education differentiation was found for participants with 11-20 years and those with more than 30 years of service in using the technique of Problem Solving (Tamhane sig.= .041). On the parameter experience as headmaster differentiation was found for participants with 6-10 and 11-15 years when using the technique of Competition (Tamhane sig.= .004) and for participants with less than 5 years, 11-15, and more than 15 years when using the technique of Problem Solving (Tamhane sig.= .008).

Lastly, for the parameter of Type of School, differentiation was found for participants managing High Schools and EPAS (technical schools) regarding the technique of Ignorance (Tamhane sig.= .028), participants managing EPAL (vocational lyceum) and all other school types regarding the technique of Compromise (Tamhane sig.= .027 - .003) and for participants running EPAS, High Schools and Lyceum in relation to the technique of Competition (Tamhane sig.= .015 - .000).

Discussion of Results – Proposals

In the first survey question the results show that from the eleven types of conflicts, participants stated that two were found “frequently” and “often”, namely the conflict between two students and the conflict between a teacher and a student. These belong to interpersonal and intergroup type of conflicts (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Zavlanos, 1987; Saitis, 1994). Their occurrence frequency is high in relation to other types of conflicts which appear occasionally and rare.

In the second survey question, the results show that of the five techniques of resolving conflicts, participants choose two “often” and “very often”: the technique of problem solving and the technique of compromise. These two techniques seek mutual satisfaction between the two sides, based in the context of exchange and cooperation for the common good (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008; Everard and Morris, 1999). Their occurring frequency, classified as often and very often, is higher than the other three techniques.

In the third question of the survey, the results showed that sex, age, extra post studies, training in school management and in handling conflicts, do not constitute parameters of differentiation in choosing the technique of managing conflicts at school. Differentiation exists regarding the parameters of “years of serving at public education” in relation to the technique of Problem Solving for headmasters with more than 11 years of service. Differentiation also exists for the parameter of “experience as headmaster” in relation to the techniques of:

- a) Competition for headmasters with 6-15 years
- b) Problem Solving for those with less than 5 years and those with more than 11 years.

Differentiation also exists regarding the type of school and the techniques of:

- a) Ignorance for headmasters of High School and Technical Schools.
- b) Compromise for headmasters of all school types
- c) Competition for headmasters of High School, Lyceum and Technical School

The bibliographical review identified a limited body of similar surveys, which were also focused on elementary schools. The results of this survey offer robust conclusions for the West Attica Prefecture, but not necessarily for all the headmasters of schools in Greece. Thus we can conclude that this survey is a good source of information on the subject and a good motive for conducting similar surveys throughout the country.

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