MANPOWER AND EMPLOYEE RELATIONS POLICIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF GREEK PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper aims to assess how Coronavirus has affected Labour-Management Relations and ordinary work in Greek primary and secondary education. The relevant literature has been studied and evidence was collected by primary and secondary school principals. The results have revealed that the higher proportion of the principals believe that the Pandemic has affected to a large degree: (i) their relationship with the teachers and (ii) teachers' everyday work. Moreover, the conclusions report several indications on the emerging role of school principals during the health crisis and propose certain perspectives for future research.

Keywords: School Management, Pandemic, COVID-19, Principals, Employee Relations, Leadership.

JEL Classification: I18, I20, I30, J59, J88

Introduction

In the fall of 2021 the COVID-19 Pandemic outbreak had yet to appear as a partly uncontrollable phenomenon on the Globe. That Coronavirus has transformed certain functions of our working and living conditions (Vlados 2020a) and has fostered a novel stage of human beings' evolution (Vlados 2020b). Coronavirus, has massively affected several aspects of living and working conditions and, has also posed certain challenges for dozens of policymakers and managers globally (Freundl et al, 2021).

Despite the good scenario that the vaccines against COVID-19 would hinder or prevent future Coronavirus outbreaks, the thousands of instances and/or casualties all over the world did not leave any space for complacence. The sanitary and isolation measures which have been adopted by several Governments worldwide have challenged basic psychological needs, for instance competence, autonomy and affiliation (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Coronavirus has negatively affected several functions of socioeconomic life. Due to the high danger for their health and/or life, millions of citizens were pushed to change their living and working conditions and to radically re-organise plenty of their habits and activities.

In the field of primary and secondary education the Governments imposed significant restrictions concerning social distancing and the use of personal protective equipment.

Moreover, the Pandemic has promoted teleworking and distance learning as well as transformed rapidly the attitudes of both teachers and students against educational process. Additionally, some dysfunctions concerning a novel way to implement various administrative directives were gradually appeared.

Aim of this paper is to evaluate whether the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected Work and Labour-Management Relations in the Greek Schools. First, the pertinent literature on the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in manpower, employee relations, emotional labour and leadership within educational communities have been discussed. Then, the planning and implementation of a proper survey have been presented in order to assess the current situation within schools. Last, the paper has searched whether COVID-19 Pandemic has affected profoundly HRM role/ practices, organizational processes and teachers' emotional labour.

The findings are focused on the labour-management relations and the everyday teachers' work during the lockdown and quarantine measures. Finally, certain conclusions and the perspectives for future research are reported.

Literature review

Education and students during the Coronavirus Crisis

One of the sectors that has been seriously affected by the Coronavirus is education. The pandemic outbreak obliged several governments to adopt ad hoc measures to stop the dispersion of the virus via social activities. Schools has been such a place of social interaction.

In a relevant study has been reported that plenty of participants felt negative emotions (77.7%) such as stress, anxiety and sadness. Furthermore, several negative characteristics of web-based education have been reported, such as a lack of personal contact, technical difficulties, a difficulty in concentrating and participating in the class, too many hours in front of a monitor, a lack of physical presence in the campus, more workload and a cancelation of certain work placements and lab courses (Karalis and Raikou, 2020).

During the Pandemic, pressure on schools that remain open has been increased. Moreover, school closures at the local level have taken place as several parents have reduced their children's' participation in open schools (Onyema, 2020). In that new framework, teaching staff was obliged to face challenges regarding their personal development, and/or digital skills. A pertinent paper has been stressed the necessity to adopt teaching and learning technology as a means to reduce the effects of Coronavirus on educational activities (Onyema, 2020). Furthermore, teacher beliefs about their capacity and their professional commitment are related with the impact of principals' leadership on student achievements and teachers training (Alsobaie, 2015).

Besides, jobs in the educational sector have also been affected; as many workers have risked pay cuts or even disengagement from work during unscheduled school closures they eventually felt stress and insecurity (Onyema, 2020). On the other hand, the increased pressure on teaching staff within open schools has augmented the feeling of work-related stress and the health and safety risks (Onyema, 2020).
It should be noted that in the Greek educational system, the administrative bodies of each primary and secondary schools have been the principal/director, the deputy director and the association of teachers of that school (Jecchinis and Koutroukis, 1992:133). Several efforts have been made in the past to foster schools' self-

management and engage teachers in school site decision making but these efforts have not been fully successful (Cooper, 1992:7).

Teacher Employee relations and emotions at the workplace

Employee relations might be defined as policies and practices which are concerned with the management and regulation of relationships between the organisation, the individual worker and groups of personnel at the workplace. That employment relationship has been based on certain effective mechanisms that promote communication, participation, safe working environment, commitment, and motivation of the personnel. More specifically, employee relations in education could be described as the laws, policies, and practice that define the interaction between teachers and their bosses, principal, superintendents and school boards, and/or the state and local government (Cooper, 1992:8). In addition, the union representatives also have an organizational dimension, which affects in one way or another the decision-making process, the norm of employee-side involvement, and the definition of teaching work (Cooper, 1992:7). Furthermore, cooperative employee relations may enrich the emotional dimension of working procedure.

The main stressor factors during the Pandemic have been the fears of disinfection, frustration, and boredom. Their consequences were the following: stress disorders, anxiety, irritability, poor concentration, exhaustion, insomnia, indecisiveness, and deterioration of work performance. Moreover, employee commitment has been also affected and this has a negative impact on employee relations as there has been poor communication and/or lack of face–to-face interaction (Triantafillidou and Koutroukis, 2022:35). Organizations with a strong corporate culture can better manage the sanitary crisis and focus (more on employee engagement (Triantafillidou and Koutroukis, 2022:38). Collaborative labour-management relations could positively affect job satisfaction, organizational commitment and personnel motivation, organizational trust and justice improving employee and organizational performance (Triantafillidou and Koutroukis, 2022:34). Regarding the main aspects of working and living conditions during the Pandemic, wage-earners have also witnessed less travel and commuting, new checking mechanisms, higher workload, demand for more flexibility and remote work, and a need for more multi-skilled workforce (Gonçalves, et al, 2021).

In addition, workers were concerned because many employers made decisions to face the economic consequences of the Pandemic that forced employees to accept worse terms and conditions of employment (Fayyad, et al, 2021).

In a recent study, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has distinguished several elements of job quality concerning workers from home in contrast with the ones that work from another place: More specifically, workers from home were less likely to feel that they're doing a useful job and more often have reported high quantitative demands and feelings of isolation. Moreover, about one third of respondents have noticed that they feel physically exhausted at the end of the working day always or most of the times. That share is larger on women and younger employees 18-34 years old (Eurofound, 2020).

Other researchers have reported that, due to the impact of Coronavirus, poor relations among workers and limited meetings of personnel at the workplace have been noted. The Pandemic made difficult the maintenance of harmony and peace within organizations as well as the focus and motivation in keeping and pursuing various personal and organizational goals (Kaushik and Gulleria, 2020).
Robinson-Neal has stressed that it is interesting to study the psychological influences of the Pandemic on instructors in primary, secondary and post-secondary classrooms, as it would be critical for the educational institutions to explore the psychological differences in teachers and faculty caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic (Robinson-Neal, 2021). Another study has stressed that, during working from home, teachers have felt bored, lost their motivation and needed a new atmosphere (Purwanto, et al, 2020).

Certain researchers have pointed out that home study has transformed the teachers' habits and attitudes and additionally might change the style and strategy of teaching methods and the communication style during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Moreover, the principals should act as leaders in fostering a teaching-friendly working environment and creating the deliverance of an effective and active experience of distance learning (Efrianto et al. 2020).

Another paper has noted that superintendents and union leaders in eleven out of twelve sites have characterized their prepandemic labour-management relations collaborative. Moreover, leaders in seven out of twelve study sites noted that labour-management relations have been better during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Both social partners have seen COVID-19 as a health crisis of mutual interest that pushed them to find common solutions (Koppich, 2021).

Thus, leaders of both labour and management sides have faced problems regarding students' access to digital devices and connectivity as well as teachers attempts to commit students and parents in distance learning. Finally, schools' face-to-face activities should take into account the health and safety policies and practices that

have been implemented (Koppich, 2021). Additionally, managers and/or leaders should implement proper measures in order to engage to a greater extent employees during the sanitary crisis (Triantafillidou and Koutroukis, 2022:34).

Human Resource Managers in the COVID-19 Era

The several challenges that were faced by the manpower all over the world due to the accelerating consequences of the Pandemic were very significant. Pandemic has been affecting the survival of both workforce and organisations. Human Resource Managers have undertaken the crucial role of implementing the measures of social distancing, of reducing the spread of Coronavirus, meeting the employee's needs concerning health and safety, and of handling personnel anxiety and stress (Gonçalves, et al, 2021).

During the Pandemic HR Managers have been trying to maintain employee morale at high level within organisations, to ensure transparent internal communications, to boost personnel motivation and/or to improve employees' training (Nutsubidze and Schmidt, 2021).

HRM professionals had not been prepared enough in terms of information, resources, and competencies to face the complex and novel challenges of the Coronavirus Era (Hamouche, 2021). Moreover, the Pandemic laid down novel challenges for the HRM departments: managing employee morale, fostering motivation and engagement, ensuring employee mental health and well-being or establishing transparent communication and upgrading the training level of the personnel (Gonçalves, et al, 2021).

HRM professionals' main concern is fostering employee morale, motivation and engagement (Nutsubidze and Schmidt, 2021). Thus, HRM practitioners have to collaborate with management and the workers in order to transform the challenges brought on by the Coronavirus into an opportunity to rethink and review HRM functions and policies (Hamouche, 2021). In addition, they should try to rebuild the culture of the organization in order to facilitate the adoption of flexible work arrangements and the transition toward a hybrid working model (Hamouche, 2021).

School principals as leaders

The impact of COVID-19 on principals' professionalism has been very important. Due to the Pandemic, they may have more opportunities to increase their professionalism in terms of expert knowledge and autonomy. In those circumstances, the pressure on school principals to succeed in their duties has been

strong. Thus, they find new ways to work together with the stakeholders to build relationships with young people and to get recognition regarding their leading role work (Stone-Johnson, and Miles Weiner, 2020).

Additionally, the nature of school leadership enforces principal professionalism, especially in managing turbulent challenges. Thus, their work might ultimately be the basis of building a true profession–valuing expertise, promoting autonomy, developing an ethic of service, and rewarding the school principals' work (Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner, 2020).

A paper that has studied numerous school principals ascertained that they need proper training in order to improve their professional development and obtain skills that will assist them in managing problems linked with Coronavirus. Due to that fact school leaders have been obliged to reorganise several functions of school management in order to face the emerging circumstances of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The principal and the teachers were unable to establish adequate communication within the school community during the implementation of lockdown and quarantine measures, as schools could not find any development programs to address the health-protection issues they have faced (Vijayabaskar and Bandara, 2020),

It was difficult for the school principals to create a collective accountability formula to meet the challenges of the disruption caused by COVID-19 given the limited resources and the lack of technical knowledge to distance and online teaching and learning. (Vijayabaskar and Bandara, 2020).

According to Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner, principals maintain much of their prior efforts and also meet the unprecedented challenges that were created by the Pandemic for their staff, families, and students. There is no doubt that during the health crisis, school principals have been essential workers and have faced significant risks regarding teachers' health and safety (Stone-Johnson, and Miles Weiner, 2020).

The role of school principals in controlling and coordinating the whole distance learning project was catalytic. Specifically, they had to adopt a structuring leadership style and to empower teaching staff both emotionally and morally (Kafa and Pashiardis, 2020).

It is obvious that principals needed training to manage the situation arising from the Pandemic and to build the schools' capacity for conducting distance and/or face-to-face teaching (Vijayabaskar and Bandara, 2020).

Given the need for a shift away from mere delivery to deep learning, it may be important to consider the principals' role in this process. School principals have to invent new ways to supply better and more equitable opportunities for teachers. Moreover, their novel duties and obligations might undermine the capacity of school management to face the rising threats and opportunities. Specifically, recent studies have indicated that school principals report higher levels of dissatisfaction and burnout as well as a diminished sense of autonomy. Moreover, certain findings have shown an emerging need to explore the factor of principals' professionalism and to assess the extent in which their work is organised and controlled (Stone-Johnson, and Miles Weiner, 2020)

Principals in primary or secondary education should rethink, review and redesign their roles in order to succeed high employee's morale. School leaders need to engage the workers in constructive activities, maintain productive and safe workplaces and create initiatives as counselling services in reducing fear and stress (Triantafillidou and Koutroukis, 2022:35-36, 42).

Methodology

The empirical research project has adopted a qualitative method in order to deal with real problems and practices, to highlight several management initiatives and meet school leaders' needs during the Pandemic (Spyropoulou and Koutroukis, 2021).
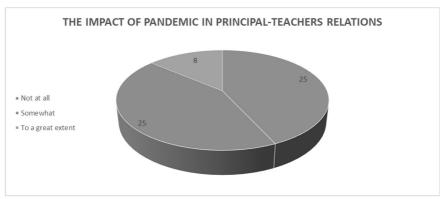
Using a questionnaire with open-ended questions, school principals in Western Thessaloniki have been facilitated to write down their own experience within schools during the time of COVID-19. 57 principals of both levels of public education have responded. The two main interview questions have been the following: A) *How have the pandemic conditions affected (if they have affected) your relationship with the teachers' association?* and, B) *How have pandemic conditions affected (if they have affected) the everyday work of your colleagues at school?*.

Principals' answers were analysed and categorised through reporting patterns of their experiences (Spyropoulou and Koutroukis, 2021). The relevant thematic analysis has been conducted by the technique of Interrater agreement, which measures the concordant assessment of responses by two independent raters in order to assure the reliability of the research project. The analysis resulted in two main themes, which were: a) principal-teachers relations b) everyday teachers' work (Spyropoulou and Koutroukis, 2021).

Findings

The main findings that have come up from the survey may be summarised on the following graphs. The first one, shows the principals' views concerning the impact of Coronavirus in labour-management relations.

Graph 1

THE IMPACT OF PANDEMIC IN PRINCIPAL-TEACHERS RELATIONS

- Not at all
- Somewhat
- To a great extent

8

25

25

Source: Procession of primary data

The more interesting answers that were given by the participants to the Question A have been reported on Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Answers concerning Question A

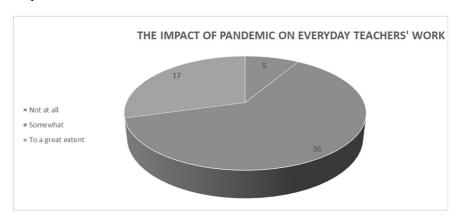|	
Respondent No 6	"*Thankfully they did not affect them negatively*".
Respondent No 7	"*All the teachers recognises the seriousness of the situation and they are trying their best every day*".
Respondent No 11	"*Of course they affected them. Initially because of the protective mask but also the distances that necessarily grew, the contact, the handshake and the normality were lost. Fear, hesitation, doubt and suspicion were added*".
Respondent No 12	"*They contributed to the strengthening of camaraderie and cooperativeness*".
Respondent No 13	"*Constant reminder for public distancing, washing hands and using a mask*".
Respondent No 14	"*Some teachers express nervousness*".
Respondent No 17	"*Enough due to disagreements*".
Respondent No 19	"*So f-ar it is controllable... However, there are problems with professors that have excessive phobias*".
Respondent No 22	"*Our relationship was shaken*". Respondent No 23 asserted that "*Diffuse anxiety, minor disturbance of trust and communication*".
Respondent No 25	"*It affected them because, unfortunately, all schools did not implement the measures in the same way since each school adapted them to its particular conditions*".
Respondent No 28	"*The time of pedagogical cooperation and support decreased as the obligations of planning, implementation, monitoring of measures increased*".
Respondent No 38	"*The Pandemic has created a big problem in the operation of schools, but the good cooperation with colleagues and the effort that almost everyone has made to carry out mainly asynchronous, but also synchronous distance learning showed the excellent relationships that existed and continue to exist between the principal and the teachers*".
Respondent No 41	"They improved the already good relations".
Respondent No 42	"*Relations with the teachers were not affected. Good communication and effort to understand all the issues that arise still exist*".

Respondent No 47	"*Some disagreements occurred concerning the operation of the school*".
Respondent No 50	"*The Faculty Association responded with firmness and real understanding to everything*".
Respondent No 53	"*Our stress level contributed to the development of tension between us. In general though, I feel lucky because there is a climate of cooperation and compassion between us*".
Respondent No 56	"*All of us are scared... Especially when someone from the Teachers' Association is overexcited concerning the protection issues... That's where problems arise...*".
Respondent No 57	"*We walk together and thus we are stronger in order to face the problem*".

Source: Processing data from the interviews

Those data and quotes represent the industrial relations climate and the employee morale that was dominant during the implementation of measures against COVID-19. Given the circumstances of emergency, it seems that the impact of Coronavirus was significant. Although, that impact may be different for each school or employing person.

The graph 2 shows the principals' views concerning the impact of Coronavirus in everyday teachers work.

Graph 2

THE IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON EVERYDAY TEACHERS' WORK

5
17
36

- Not at all
- Somewhat
- To a great extent

Source: Procession of primary data

The more interesting answers that were given by the participants to the Question A have been reported on Table 2.

Table 2: Selected Answers concerning Question B

Respondent No 2	*"The use of a mask inhibits the teaching process"*
Respondent No 6	*"They feel drained"*
Respondent No 15	*"More stress and uncertainty".*
Respondent No 18	*"There is certainly fatigue, greater responsibility, fear, uncertainty and they are reserved concerning the progress of the situation. Alertness and responsibility are required both at the pedagogical/cognitive level and at the behavioral level".*
Respondent No 20	"*They made their job more difficult*".
Respondent No 27	"*They seem to ease the initial difficulties and slowly return to a normality. They seem to have accepted the use of the mask and social distancing measures. The initial anxiety seems to subside*".
Respondent No 28	"*The way they taught has changed, as only teaching via lecture is now adopted, it takes greater effort to be understood and understand other due to the mask, greater burden due to separate breaks* ".
Respondent No 31	"*Great psychological stress, insecurity, uncertainty about the future".*
Respondent No 34	"*Effort to conform to the situation (use of a mask, distancing) and a new way of cooperation with the students*"
Respondent No 38	"*The daily work of my colleagues during the period of closure of schools was the provision of distance education. Right now, apart from the fear that all my colleagues face due to COVID 19, the daily work of my colleagues has not been affected and they offer their best as teachers and as supporters of students during the difficult period we are facing*".
Respondent No 42	"*The daily work of colleagues was affected due to the Pandemic conditions making our daily lives worse. My colleagues need to work longer and more intensively. Moments of rest are rare in the current conditions and the ability to communicate with each other is limited*".

Respondent No 50	"*On almost a daily basis, part of the teaching hours is spent on issues related to the systematic application of hygiene rules in the classroom...*"
Respondent No 52	"*The conditions of the Pandemic have affected everyday work which is different and more demanding for both teachers and children*".
Respondent No 54	"*They are more attentive to the use of common tools, brochures, books, PCs etc*".
Respondent No 56	"*Our work has become more stressful, everyone is wondering what will happen if we have a case in our school or if there is a case in their children's schools. There is also difficulty in managing sick children in general, what the protocol dictates and whether the parents will cooperate. Finally, it is necessary to mention that the use of a mask makes it very difficult for us to hear and understand toddlers when they talk*"
Respondent No 57	"*Not many activities can be done*".

Source: Processing data from the interviews

Those data and quotes represent the Coronavirus impact on work routine and, specifically, the regular course of procedure, commonplace tasks, chores, or duties as must be done regularly or at specified intervals. Given the adoption of distance learning schemes and/or the health crisis that mandated new tasks and duties for the teachers (implementation of several sanitary restrictions etc.), it seems that the impact of Coronavirus was important. Nevertheless, that impact was not the same in every workplace.

Conclusions and Perspectives for Future Research

The aim of this paper was to evaluate whether the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected everyday work and Labour-Management Relations in Greek Schools.
The findings have indicated that a vast majority of the principals believe that the Pandemic has affected their relationship with the teachers to a great or a significant extent. Only a small share believes that the Pandemic has not affected those relations. The main aspects of that affection have been reported to be negative (i.e. obstacles on communication and trust, skepticism on health and safety measures, lower level of job satisfaction, fear, anxiety, fatigue, stress, refusal to use face cover etc.) or positive (i.e. cooperation, good communication, improvement of the spirit of brotherhood and collaboration and the relations among colleagues etc.).

The findings on the first research question were similar to the results of Kaushik et al (2020), Koppich (2021), Nutsubidze and Schmidt (2021), Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner (2020) and Hamouche (2021), and they mostly refer to the unrest of principal-teachers balance and the collaborative efforts to maintain harmony in the employment relations within schools at the time of lockdown and distance-learning.

Moreover, the evidence has shown that the vast majority of the principals believe that the Pandemic has affected teachers' everyday work to a great or a significant extent. Only a small share believes that the Pandemic has not affected the teachers work. The more important implications reported by the school principals were the following: difficulties in working process, stress, insecurity, fatigue, sense of wasting and loss, uncertainty and insecurity, fear of contact, management of the Pandemic, workload/ more tasks and duties, less face-to-face communication, more communication via Internet, sense of satisfaction for promoting a common goal, peer support etc. The findings on the second research question have several common points with the publications of Eurofound (2020), Karalis and Raikou (2020), Purwanto et al. (2020) and Onyema et al (2020), and are concerned notably with the emotions/ feelings that have been emerged among teachers during the early Pandemic.

To sum up, COVID-19 Pandemic has affected both HRM role and practices and organizational processes (leadership, communications, remote working, technology, work organization, everyday working life and workplace reorganisation). However, it seems to have caused positive relationships at the workplace which have been reflected on internal communication and professionals' behaviour and attitudes.

Those developments have partially changed the role the principals traditionally had and have also enriched the multiple dimensions of teachers' emotional labour.
In the era of Coronavirus, the school leaders have to manage teachers' motivation, stress management, peer communication, health and safety, and morale. Moreover, in order to create a new more digitalised and COVID-free learning environment, principals have to support teachers using modern computer and/or mobile applications in order to create a digital school community, soothe the fear of infection by Coronavirus and avoid a kind of "deschooling" as Illich described it (Rincones et al, 2021).

Last but not least, it is suggested that future researchers might gather teachers' perceptions on the above issues. In addition, they might test whether a connection between the labour relations and everyday working life with the number of the teachers of each school exists.

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