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Principal–Teacher Relationships Under the Pressure of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Critical Factors and Implications for School Leadership During Crises

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Abstract: This paper aims to present the views of Greek school principals on whether and how working amid the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected principal–teacher relationships. It mainly focuses on the factors that contributed to the quality and course of these relationships. A qualitative methodology was adopted. Data were collected from 57 principals of public primary and secondary schools who answered the open-ended questions of an online questionnaire. Written answers were analyzed using the method of thematic analysis. The analysis revealed that, given the adverse working conditions, principal–teacher relationships were affected to varying degrees and in different ways in each school unit. For forty-seven percent of principals, the relationships remained unaffected; for forty percent, the relationships worsened; and for thirteen percent, they became stronger. It was found that teacher-related factors (attitude towards increased duties/obligations and ability to manage stress and fear), as well as work climate-related factors (communication and interaction, togetherness, and pre-existing work climate) contributed to the course of principal–teacher relations amid the pandemic. The findings provide practical and theoretical implications for school leadership and human resources management in a crisis context.

Keywords: principal–teacher relationship; leadership; COVID-19 crisis; school management; education; Greece



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1. Introduction

Education has been seriously affected and disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden pivot to distance teaching and learning abruptly transformed school staff's practices, expanding, in many cases, professional boundaries [1,2] by extending principals' responsibilities beyond the strict academic framework, especially in low-income settings [3]. Moreover, the strict health protocols imposed in schools to restrain the dispersion of the virus during in-person educational procedures placed an additional burden on principals and teachers, complicating the educational process and the whole pedagogical work [4]. Relevant studies revealed that several problems occurred in the implementation of various management directives, with many school leaders feeling that local and state authorities insufficiently supported them [4,5]. It has been documented that principals, due to the high demands of their role, faced the risk of prolonged stress and burnout amid the pandemic [6]. Accordingly, teachers all over the world experienced great confusion and intense stress and fear, taking on more responsibilities while working in unsafe conditions [7,8].

In the context of such an unprecedented crisis, the risk of principals and teachers exhibiting withdrawal behaviors was considered particularly high [9,10]. For this reason, there was concern that teachers experiencing psychological distress might transmit it to their colleagues but also their students, delaying their adjustment and recovery during and after these adverse conditions [11]. The mental state of the teacher is also known to have a direct effect on students' academic progress [12]. On the other hand, positive

relationships in school life were found to significantly contribute to adapting to adversities and stressors [13]. Collaboration, open communication, and, especially, trust between principals and teachers were considered key components of a positive school climate and prerequisites for school staff commitment and school effectiveness [14], especially in crisis situations [15]. Principals, through their role and the emotional bonds they develop with their colleagues, influence teachers' attitudes, the course of relationships, and the entire school climate [16,17].

Given the importance of collaborative relationships in crisis management, this paper focuses on how school principals experienced relationships with their teachers amid the COVID-19 health crisis. This study aimed to investigate whether and how working amid the specific crisis conditions affected principal–teacher relationships and to explore the factors that contributed to the quality and course of relationships.

In the next section, the relevant literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school labor relations and the role of the principal is presented. Then, the research methodology and results are presented, followed by discussion and conclusions. Finally, we discuss the limitations of this study and the prospects for future research.

1.1. Colleague Relations and Principal–Teacher Relationships Amidst the Pandemic

Professional relationships were keenly tested and challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, research focusing on the impact of the pandemic on principal–teacher relationships is scarce. Many studies focused on the impact of the pandemic on working conditions. Most of these studies found that both teachers and school leaders experienced a considerable increase in stress and exhaustion and, at the same time, a significant limitation in contact and meetings with colleagues [8,18,19]. However, some studies found that despite difficulties and obstacles arising from unpredictable challenges, the impact of adverse conditions on interpersonal communication was moderate [20]. A study with a sample of 7,841 USA teachers showed that in school environments with supportive working conditions, i.e., fair expectations, good communication, and meaningful collaboration, teachers did not experience a decline in their sense of success, unlike their colleagues who worked in environments where these conditions were absent [21].

It has been stated that the role of principals during the pandemic was catalytic [22]. However, some studies proved that it was not only the principals' actions that determined the effective management of problems that occurred in schools: they revealed the vital significance of collegial solidarity and principals' appreciation towards their teachers, who often went beyond themselves and the requirements of their role to deal with complex adaptive challenges [4,5,23]. In some cases, it was found that teachers cooperated amid the pandemic like never before, trying, under high pressure, to solve urgent problems [24]. It was assumed that, by managing to teach fully remotely, teachers felt that the principals trusted them and recognized their abilities [25]. The above supports the claim that effective collaboration presupposes trusted relationships [24,26]. It was also found that principals who did not hesitate to show their emotions and vulnerability to their staff received more appreciation and trust [23].

1.2. Critical Factors for Leading in Crisis

The topic of school leadership in crisis situations is generally under-researched [15]. Many studies concluded that principals needed training to manage the issues raised by the disruption of the pandemic. They had to reorganize the managerial practices across all areas of school administration to face the urgent situation [27]. It was also argued that, due to the pandemic and the subsequent pressure to succeed in their leading role, principals had many opportunities to increase their professionalism by inventing new ways to work together with their colleagues and build relationships [28]. The health crisis was seen as a unique opportunity for investment in different and more effective leadership practices, leaving traditional roles behind [24,29].

It was strongly argued that, due to the increased responsibilities created by crisis conditions, principals should leverage the potential of their colleagues, including their talents, skills, knowledge, and character traits, establishing a positive culture of shared leadership [1,26,30]. It was also argued that the best school leaders are those who promote interaction and joint practices rather than deciding and acting alone [1]. According to a recent review [30], collaborative and distributed leadership were the most frequent and effective leadership styles adopted by school principals to manage the crisis. Moreover, promoting teachers' autonomy was found to be positively related to work performance [25].

Frequent and clear communication and strong connections with teachers were also highlighted by many studies as critical factors in managing schools through the pandemic [26,31,32]. Principals' trust, appreciation and thankfulness were valued as key issues for teachers to feel esteemed and included [9,32].

Furthermore, it was argued that the health crisis accelerated collaborative professionalism where it already existed and where educators already had experience of professional autonomy [24]. This is supported by the finding that academic institutions operating with a shared leadership culture managed to respond rapidly and effectively to the recent crisis and benefited from collaboration and peer support [26].

All of the above highlight the need for principals to develop their leadership skills in the direction of effective communication, empowering colleagues, sharing responsibilities, and mobilizing teachers' capacity to engage in leadership tasks. However, it turns out that this leadership style and related responsibilities are important to implement and operate before a crisis occurs [26,33], and for this reason, school leaders must be properly and timely prepared.

1.3. Aims

This study was conducted in the second month of the 2020–2021 school year. We found this period particularly stressful for principals and teachers as they were called upon, for the first time in modern history, to work amid rising coronavirus cases, following unprecedented health protocols (the total use of face masks, physical distancing, and hand disinfection). Due to the limited relevant findings, we aimed to examine how principals, along with their teachers, navigated through these demanding and challenging conditions for work relations. Specifically, we aimed to investigate, through the lived experiences of principals, whether and how working amid this crisis context affected the principal–teacher relationship. We also aimed to explore the factors, which may include attitudes, practices, or procedures, that contributed to the quality and course of relationships.

For these reasons, we addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What was the impact of the adverse conditions caused by the pandemic in schools on the principal–teacher relationship?
- (2) What factors played a critical role in the course of principal–teacher relations at this historical moment?

The ultimate goal was to advance knowledge about the impact of crisis conditions on the principal–teacher relationship and to shed light on the role of school leadership and the needs of principals regarding human resource management in a crisis context. The research methodology is presented below.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. General Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted to approach the lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings of principals in relation to the research questions. This study was conducted in collaboration with the 2nd Regional Center for Educational Planning of the Regional Directorate of Education of Central Macedonia with the ultimate goal of organizing a training seminar to empower principals (No. Approval Decision: 15/10.09.2020). In this sense, it was a needs assessment study. An invitation e-mail was sent to all schools of interest, informing the principals of the purpose of the study and encouraging them to

participate voluntarily and anonymously by completing the online study questionnaire. Principals could provide consent and obtain access to the questionnaire by clicking on the link provided at the end of the message. The online questionnaire, which was designed based on Google Forms, included an introductory note, five open-ended questions, and two demographic questions—gender and the grade level at which the principals work. The open-ended questions of interest to this paper were as follows: (a) “How have the pandemic conditions affected (if they have affected) your relationship with the teachers from the beginning of the school year?” (b) “How have the pandemic conditions affected (if they have affected) the daily work with your colleagues at school?”

2.2. Participants

This study was addressed to primary and secondary school principals working in public schools under the Directorate of Education of Western Thessaloniki. The city of Thessaloniki is in Northern Greece and is the second largest city in the country.

The sample consisted of 57 principals (26 primary and 31 secondary) from all areas of the research sample frame (15% of the total invited). A total of 29 were female and 28 were male. Due to the scarcity of relevant research and given the adverse working conditions in schools at the time this study was conducted, all the principals that participated were considered information-rich cases.

2.3. Process of Analysis

Qualitative methodology was adopted to reach principals’ lived experiences of interacting with colleagues when dealing with the emerging problems brought by the pandemic. Principals’ written answers were analyzed following the principles and steps of thematic analysis [34]. A repetitive process of active reading and data encoding was conducted in parallel and independently by the two researchers. Given the research questions, the researchers followed the “bottom-up” way to export the themes [35], applying a combination of inductive and deductive approaches [36].

Raw data were stored in Microsoft Word files, and a unique code was assigned to each participant. The responses to the questions were then compiled into a single text. In the beginning, several full-text readings were performed by the two researchers to become familiar with the data. Closer readings of the text followed to identify segments of the data with interesting aspects that could be “assessed in a meaningful way” [35] (p. 63). This process led to the generation of initial codes on the data extracts. Coding was performed manually using notes and labels. After coding the entire data, extracts with relevant codes were sorted to form patterns of meaning (key issues) and then candidate themes in relation to the research questions. All data extracts, patterns, and themes were re-read and thoroughly reviewed to ensure that the data within patterns cohered together meaningfully while the themes were clear and distinct. This process ended up defining three main themes: (a) kind of impact, (b) factors related to the teacher, and (c) factors related to the work climate. No significant discrepancies emerged in the coding and extraction of themes between the two researchers.

The main themes and the key issues that emerged from the analysis are presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Main themes and key issues.

Main Theme	Key Issues
Kind of impact	Relations were not affected Relations were negatively affected Relations improved
Factors related to the teacher	Attitude towards increased duties and obligations Ability to manage stress and fear
Factors related to work climate	Communication and interaction Togetherness Pre-existing work climate

3. Results

The negative impact of the pandemic on the daily life of schools is evident in the statements of all principals. Working conditions are summarized in the statement of a male secondary school principal: “There is certainly fatigue, increased duties, fear, uncertainty and they (the teachers) are reserved for the course of the situation. Everyday life is different and more demanding for all”.

The adverse working conditions, however, affected principal–teacher relationships to varying degrees and in different ways, as discussed below.

3.1. Kind of Impact

The way the principals responded to the first question—“How have the pandemic conditions affected (if they have affected) your relationship with the teachers from the beginning of the school year?”—allowed quantitative results to be drawn regarding the kind of impact the pandemic conditions had on principal–teacher relationships. This was achieved because, in the beginning, the principals would spontaneously note, e.g., “The relationships were positively affected” or “they worsened”, and then they explained their answers. In particular, 40 percent of the principals described that the pandemic had a low to high degree of negative impact on their relationships with teachers, 47 percent reported that the pandemic did not affect the relationships at all, while 13 percent declared that the health crisis had a positive effect on their relationships. The key issues are presented in detail below.

3.1.1. Relationships Were Not Affected

For almost half of the study’s principals, relations were not affected at all. Some principals along with their teachers seemed to have managed to adapt very quickly to the new conditions. Representatively, they mentioned, “The initial difficulties seem to be easing and we slowly getting back to normal” (primary, male) or, according to a female secondary principal, “. . .it was a parenthesis, and we return to normalcy with particular care”. Several principals reported that, despite the mental and physical fatigue caused by the implementation of sanitary measures in schools, internal relations were not shaken. Specifically, they stated, “Relationships were not affected at all, there is just always tension and concern that something unmanageable will happen” (primary, female), or “. . .we just all feel tired” (primary, female).

3.1.2. Relationships Were Negatively Affected

Forty percent of the principals reported that pandemic conditions had a negative impact on their relationships with teaching staff. Most of them noted a slight or moderate deterioration in relationships, while some mentioned relationship breakdown. In the first case, principals mainly referred to the implementation of the sanitary measures, which created a “. . .pervasive anxiety, disconnection, disturbance of trust and communication” (secondary, female). However, a small number of teachers are represented by the following statement: “Our relationships were shaken” (primary, male). The responses of two school leaders were indicative of great frustration with colleagues. One of them characteristically stated, “They [the sanitary protocols] just proved the comedown of our branch” (secondary, male).

3.1.3. Relationships Improved

A smaller proportion of principals reported that relationships with teachers improved amid the pandemic. They indicatively stated that the difficulties “. . .bound us more” (secondary, male), “. . .helped for more connection” (primary, male), “. . .improved the already good relations” (primary, male), and “. . .they contributed to the strengthening of camaraderie and cooperativeness” (primary, female). According to a female secondary principal, the demanding conditions “. . .did not affected them [the relations], on the contrary, we exchange information much more often than before”. Similarly, a male

primary school leader quoted that "...the tension and lack of pleasure made us realize the need for mutual support".

3.2. Factors Related to the Teacher

According to the principals' responses, an important role in the course of relations was played by the teachers' attitudes towards the adverse conditions and, specifically, the way they reacted to the requirements of the health protocols and the problems that arose. Teachers' attitudes towards increased duties and obligations and their ability to manage stress and fear were the key issues of this theme that are discussed next.

3.2.1. Attitudes towards Increased Duties and Obligations

Having the responsibility to implement strict sanitary protocols and to manage schools in an unprecedented crisis context, principals needed the help and cooperation of teachers like never before. Consequently, as a secondary principal noted, "...alertness and responsibility are required both at the pedagogical/cognitive level and at the behavioral level". However, according to the principals, not all teachers demonstrated the same attitude.

On the one hand, several principals stated that, despite the adverse conditions, the relations were not affected "due to the exceptional professionalism of the teachers" (primary, female). The term "professionalism" is explained in the quotes of other principals, who noted that "...the teachers' responded with consistency and a real understanding to everything" (secondary, male). Some principals expressed their appreciation for the "tolerance" of their colleagues as well as for their "discipline in the measures proposed by the state". A primary school leader stated, "All the teachers recognize the seriousness of the situation, and they are trying their best every day during the difficult period we are facing".

On the other hand, several principals faced a different attitude from some teachers. According to a male secondary principal, "...for some teachers, the principal, as a representative of the administration, is considered responsible for promoting measures on which there is disagreement or skepticism, regardless of whether these measures are state law". In some cases, the school leader seemed to be struggling alone, having taken on the full responsibility and the role of the "...constant reminder to keep distance, wash hands and use a mask" (primary, male), with a negative effect on relationships. A primary school principal characteristically noticed that "...In the beginning, there was a negative attitude towards the use of the mask by some, which led to a similar negative attitude towards me". There were principals who reported strained relationships with some teachers because of "...reactions for the school's program", "...refusals to wear the face mask", and general "disagreements". A contributing factor to these reactions and attributions of responsibility to the principal may have been the fact that "...unfortunately not all schools implemented the measures in the same way, since each school adapted them to its particular conditions" (secondary, female).

3.2.2. Ability to Manage Stress and Fear

The extreme cautiousness of some teachers was a major obstacle for several principals in maintaining a good climate in relations: "Some teachers express intense nervousness" (primary, male). "Fear, hesitation, doubt and suspicion were added, especially for some teachers" (secondary male). A female primary principal characteristically commented, "All of us are scared... especially when someone from the teachers' team is overreacting concerning the protection issues... That's where problems arise". In the same vein, another principal noted, "The situation is so far controllable... However, there are problems with teachers who have excessive phobias. They are afraid to get in touch with colleagues but also with students..." (primary, male).

3.3. Factors Related to the Work Climate

Key elements of the work climate that played a significant role in the course of the principal-teacher relationship amid the pandemic were, according to the principals'

responses, the quantity and quality of communication and interaction as well as the existence or inexistence of a climate of togetherness. The pre-existing work climate also occurred to have played a key role in the resilience of relations in the face of adversity.

3.3.1. Communication and Interaction

The pursuit of frequent communication and interaction, by all means available, proved to be a positive factor in connecting the teaching staff and especially in strengthening the principal–teacher relationship. A female primary principal pointed out that “Fortunately there was no problem in our relationships and communication because there are frequent teleconferences, informative and instructional emails. . . in order to resolve any questions”. Another principal stated very clearly that “. . . relations with the teachers were not affected because we did not stop communicating”. In addition to being frequent, communication was important to be meaningful and effective. “Consensus effort to all matters that arise” was the attitude that contributed positively to relations according to a secondary school principal.

On the contrary, several principals who reported a negative impact of adverse conditions on relationships highlighted, in different ways, the loss of contact between colleagues as the main reason. According to the principals, the conditions of the pandemic and the subsequent work intensification provoked “. . . wariness towards extensive interaction” (primary, female). “Moments of rest are rare in the current conditions and the ability to communicate with each other is limited” (secondary, female). Moreover, “. . . the time of pedagogical cooperation decreased” (primary, male). A primary school principal indicatively stated, “Of course it [the pandemic] affected them [the relations] . . . the distances that necessarily grew, the contact, the handshake and the normality were lost”. Another secondary principal emphasized that relationships had been significantly affected because there was “. . . less time in the office. . . fewer activities and events”. One principal reported that the relationship with teachers was affected a lot because, as a member of a vulnerable group, he had to work isolated in the principal’s office. Health protocols were applied at the expense of communication and interaction which, according to the principals’ quotes, proved to be a key source of pleasure in the work context. This resulted in the feeling that “. . . we have lost the joy of work” (secondary, male).

3.3.2. Togetherness

A factor that emerged from the responses of those principals who stated that relationships were not affected by difficult circumstances or improved was the existence of a climate of compassion, reciprocity, and mutual support. A principal characteristically stated, “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” (primary, female). It appeared that “. . . understanding each other’s position and trying to put ourselves in his shoes” (secondary, male) contributed to the creation of the aforementioned climate in relations. Some principals emphasized the support they received from their colleagues. Five principals praised their teachers’ “. . . immediate response. . . utilizing their own resources under difficult conditions” (secondary, female). One of them appreciated “. . . the good mood of the teaching staff and their ingenuity in finding solutions to the particular problems of the school” (primary male). According to a male primary principal, “. . . we walk together and thus we are stronger in order to face the problems”.

3.3.3. The Pre-Existing Good Climate

“The long-established relationship of trust and cooperation” (secondary, male) was highlighted by some principals as a particularly helpful factor in the school staff’s adaptation and resilience to the adversities and challenges brought by the health crisis. A male secondary principal indicatively stated, “Relations with the teachers were not affected because of the already good climate that existed”. In the same vein, a secondary school principal stressed that “. . . 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 headmaster and the teachers”.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the principals’ experiences and perceptions about their relationship with teachers during an extremely stressful time due to the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and the health protocols imposed on schools. Admittedly, the sanitary crisis aggravated working conditions and disturbed the school routine, requiring increased alertness and responsibility from both principals and teachers. Given the ever-increasing work intensification of teachers and principals [33], the findings reveal that adversity affected principal–teacher relations to varying degrees and in different ways. Factors related to the teacher and factors related to the work climate played a key role in the course of the relationships, as presented below.

4.1. *The Impact of Pandemic Conditions on the Principal–Teacher Relationship*

This study revealed that some school teaching associations succeeded and adapted very quickly to the new complex conditions and the restrictive measures in schools. In these cases, principals referred to the pandemic as a parenthesis, talking about a normalcy that was slowly returning to the school routine. Despite the commonly admitted mental and physical fatigue caused by work intensification, for almost half of the principals, internal relationships were not affected.

On the other hand, forty percent of the principals reported that relationships had deteriorated. Due to and during the changes in working conditions, according to health protocols, there were principals who experienced the distancing of some teachers, a negative attitude, and a breakdown of trust and communication in their relationships. Some principals shared their frustration with their colleagues.

At the same time, thirteen percent of the principals reported that their relations with colleagues improved amid the pandemic. The adverse conditions made them realize the need for mutual support and strengthened camaraderie, connection, and cooperativeness. This finding supports the view that the sanitary crisis could function as a catalyst for restoring problematic relations between principals and teachers [26].

4.2. *Critical Factors for the Course of Principal–Teacher Relations Amid the Pandemic*

According to the principals, a decisive role in the course of relations was played by the attitudes of the teachers towards the increased duties and obligations, specifically the way they reacted to the requirements of the health protocols and the difficulties that arose. To organize and manage the school units in a crisis context, principals needed the help of teachers like never before. In particular, they needed their teachers to show alertness and responsibility at all levels. However, according to the principals’ responses, not all teachers adopted a similar attitude. Some teachers performed with exceptional professionalism, responding with discipline, consistency, tolerance, and a real understanding of the seriousness of the situation, giving their best efforts to overcome the difficulties. This attitude was praised in the principals’ quotes and underlined as a key factor in positive principal–teacher relationships. The finding that, despite the pandemic adversities, some teachers remained engaged, focused, determined, and passionate about work is in line with the findings of a previous study [5]. On the contrary, some principals faced disagreements from teachers regarding the use of face masks but also the readjustment of the school program. In these cases, the teachers attributed responsibility to the principal for implementing the protocols. This attitude of teachers caused strained relations with the principals who seemed, through their answers, to struggle alone to implement the measures.

Another factor that appeared to influence the principals’ perceptions of the quality of relationships with colleagues was the teachers’ ability to manage stress and fear concerning

the coronavirus disease. The intense nervousness and excessive phobias, cautiousness, and overreactions of some teachers in matters of closeness and protection were, for some principals, a serious obstacle to maintaining harmonious relationships. Some principals seemed unable to manage these overreactions and attitudes, which disrupted the whole group dynamic. This finding supports the notion that interactions with distressed colleagues can lead to a distressing atmosphere [37].

In addition to factors related to individual teachers' attitudes, the principals emphasized the critical contribution of communication and interaction to the course of relationships. Some school leaders used all available means to stay connected with colleagues by providing information and relevant instructions. This finding confirms the conclusion of a recent review that "multidimensional communication" is a critical factor in the effective management of crisis conditions by educational leaders [15] (p. 141). Frequent and effective communication and an effort to respond to any question and reach a consensus on all the issues that arose helped to connect the school staff and maintain relationships. The contribution of communication to maintaining good relations amid the pandemic was also confirmed in previous studies [23,38,39]. Therefore, the principals who reported that the adverse conditions had a negative impact on relationships stressed the loss of contact and interaction as an aggravating factor for the work climate. Cooperation with teachers was now lost, leading, according to one principal, to the loss of the joy of work. The above is in line with the finding that teachers experience a decline in their sense of success when working in schools that lack effective communication and collaboration [21].

Another factor that emerged from the responses of those principals who stated that relationships were unaffected by adversity or improved was the existence of a climate of compassion, reciprocity, and mutual support. Understanding each other's positions, taking initiative, offering for the common good, and working together to solve problems were found to help principals and teachers to stay strong and deal effectively with problems. The above finding supports the claim that empathetic thinking leads to the progress of organizations through building mutually understanding relationships [40]. The ingenuity and initiative of teachers to find solutions to the problems that arose is a finding that also emerged in other relevant studies [5,24,25].

Furthermore, the findings reveal that, beyond the commonly admitted fatigue and tension caused by the unpredictable conditions, some relationships remained unaffected or even improved due to long-established relationships of trust and cooperation. According to the principals, the good climate in relationships that existed before the outbreak of the pandemic helped the school staff to adapt and effectively manage the adversities that arose. This finding confirmed the importance of pre-existing relationships of collaboration and trust for effective response to the COVID-19 crisis, which was also evidenced in previous studies [3,5,24].

4.3. Implications for School Leadership in Crisis Situations

The imposition of health protocols in schools was, for several principals, the main aggravating factor for relationships as they were applied at the expense of previous sources of pleasure in the work context. Through the participants' responses, it was found that some principals, along with their teachers, were extremely trapped in adverse conditions, unable to manage the losses caused by the pandemic, with serious consequences on their relationships. This finding highlights the need for creative and empowering leadership practices and actions to maintain teachers' morale and connection with each other and work. To achieve the above, however, principals need to have the necessary crisis and change management skills, as pointed out by relevant scholars [15,33,39].

Another finding was that some principals received objections and accusations from their colleagues regarding the implementation of sanitary measures and the modifications of the school program, making the principal responsible for the decisions. It could be assumed that the principals who adopted the measures a priori, leaving no room for discussion and relative fermentation, may have had the most reactions and conflicts, especially if they had

colleagues who questioned the measures. Given that there are teachers who have difficulty managing change and accepting new data [20], the above finding highlights the need for and the importance of allocating time and space for collective decision making, mutual commitment, and co-responsibility in the management of adverse conditions in schools. Scholars have already pointed out that leaders who promote interaction and joint practices have better outcomes than those who decide and act alone [1].

Another key finding was the effect of some teachers' intense nervousness, fear, and cautiousness about issues of closeness and protection on the principal's perception of peer relations and general group dynamics. Some principals seemed unable to manage the overreactions and attitudes of their colleagues. However, given the effect of psychological state on performance and work commitment [9,25], a trusted and nurturing leader is needed in these situations, who will provide support and encouragement to his/her colleagues to remain resilient and engaged. Supporting teachers' psychological needs through principal-teacher interactions has been found to prevent teacher burnout and intention to leave work [41]. Moreover, caring leadership has been found to reduce emotional distance and contribute to a positive school climate [16]. Principals' mental health literacy [42] is also critical to identify the symptoms of mental health problems early, knowing where to seek help, and preventing the stigmatization of vulnerable colleagues. The relationship of trust is also vital in cases where the principal will need to refer a colleague to a mental health service.

Furthermore, the principals of this study provided data confirming previous findings [5,25] about the importance of teachers' ingenuity and initiative in finding solutions to the problems caused by the pandemic. These findings suggest that the state of 'weakness' in which the principals found themselves, due to the crisis, created the space for teachers' real potential to emerge, which otherwise might have been inactive or limited within the classroom. This potential of teachers could be leveraged and reinforced by principals through an autonomy-supportive leadership style, which was found to be positively related to teachers' work commitment and performance [9,25].

5. Conclusions

The present study provides empirical evidence on the impact of adverse conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on principal-teacher relationships from the perspective of principals. The findings highlight specific factors that can affect work relationships and team dynamics when faced with demanding and critical conditions.

According to the participants' perspectives, it is not only the principal who is responsible for the quality and course of relationships. Given this, it would be helpful for principals and teachers to jointly participate in training programs and group counseling to enhance communication and conflict resolution skills. This, in turn, would help to form a common philosophy and strategy for managing critical situations in schools. Training and counseling in school crisis management would also strengthen the preparedness and resilience of principals and teachers.

Another issue that became apparent from the participants' reports was the principals' need for support and assistance. It could be stated that, in many cases, the sanitary crisis uncovered the real potential of teachers and perhaps the weaknesses of principals. The COVID-19 pandemic may have been an opportunity for educational leaders to test their ability to trust, listen more, accept advice, and free themselves from the need to know everything.

This study shows that some principals, along with their teachers, were not discouraged by the pandemic and may have come out stronger and more united. It is not clear, however, whether this was due to effective leadership practices or the willingness and skills of teachers. It was probably due to both. According to the findings, some principals with their staff had found a way to relate and cooperate before the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining, even in the storm, their own 'normality', summed up in the phrase "We walk together and

thus we are stronger”. Perhaps this is the basic principle and the redemptive ‘normality’ that the educational system and all of humanity need.

Limitations and Perspectives for Future Research

The small sample size, the use of a convenience sample, and voluntary participation do not allow for the generalization of the results. It would be useful to compare the present findings with studies conducted in other regions of the country and in different countries to highlight differences and similarities in the principals’ perceptions of the impact of pandemic conditions on principal–teacher relationships. It would be interesting to explore the experiences of teachers alongside those of principals in the same school to make comparisons. Moreover, years of service in the same school, age, leadership training, and other factors not of interest to this study, such as the number of teachers the principle leads, may have influenced principals’ perceptions of relationships with colleagues.

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