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ΕΡΕΥΝΗΤΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ

Exploring the relationship between empowering leadership and the presence of teacher conflict in kindergartens in Crete

OBJECTIVE **To assess the degree of correlation between the empowering type of leadership of kindergarten's directors/leaders and the possible presence of conflict among teachers.** METHOD **The survey was conducted between February and March 2025 among 220 teachers of 190 public kindergartens in the prefecture of Heraklion, Crete. They completed a structured questionnaire that included weighted Scales of Empowering Leadership & Intragroup Conflict. Their scores were determined on a scale of 0–100 and using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25.0, the correlations between them and the participants' characteristics were evaluated using Spearman and Mann-Whitney non-parametric methods.** RESULTS **Out of the participants, 219 were female and the mean age of all participants was found to be 45.3 years. A total of 50.0% reported either holding or pursuing a postgraduate degree. In terms of job position, 55.0% were kindergarten teachers in a classroom and 56.9% reported working in education for >15 years. Empowering Leadership was assessed with high mean scores (69.9/100) and Intergroup Conflict with low mean scores (26.4/100) ($p<0.05$). The increased presence of Empowering Leadership was associated with a lower presence of Intragroup Conflict (rho=-0.272, $p<0.05$) while participants who demonstrated the presence of Intragroup Conflict in relation to counterparts also recorded significantly lower mean score of Empowering Leadership (59.2 versus 72.2, $p<0.001$).** CONCLUSIONS **Empowering leadership is strongly distinguished in kindergartens in Crete, with the presence of conflicts being found to a low degree and associated with a lower presence of empowering leadership. The characteristics of empowering leadership can be an application of conflict resolution frameworks, with staff training in effective communication and promotion of cooperation through restorative practices, for the harmonious functioning of kindergartens.**

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ΑΡΧΕΙΑ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ 2027, 44(1):24–31

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Διερεύνηση της σχέσης της ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας και της παρουσίας συγκρούσεων μεταξύ εκπαιδευτικών σε νηπιαγωγεία της Κρήτης

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

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In the field of education, the leadership role of school directors significantly influences the development of school institutions.[1] With the increasingly complex development of the modern era, it is difficult for school directors to carry out all the responsibilities of managing and leading their school alone. A school director/leader who is able to inspire teachers and the school staff as a whole will encourage enthusiasm and spirit in teachers' performance so that they are more enthusiastic and positive. International research shows that good school leadership can have a positive

impact on the progress and development of schools.[1,2]

Empowering Leadership, as one of the many forms of managing organizations and their members, refers to the distribution of power between the leaders of the organization and the team, subordinates and overall staff.[3,4] For example, the work of kindergarten teachers is a process of knowledge reconstruction. They have to present the knowledge defined by an educational program or the skills that children need to learn in a new and understandable way. This process requires strong creativity and motivation on the part of teachers. The redistribution of organizational power that comes with empowering leadership helps to increase work engagement and therefore creativity.[3,5]

At the same time, empowering leadership is also a particular administrative function and is therefore a critical factor in promoting the well-being and welfare of kindergarten teachers.[3] It appears to be closely linked to teachers' welfare, influencing, among other things, their ability to participate in decision making, problem solving on their own, but also promoting and enhancing creative behaviour, work engagement and success in learning outcomes.[1,3,6–8]

Therefore, it is important for school directors to understand their role in the institutional development of the school, its functions and the ongoing challenges in the dynamic environment of education. Particularly, when ongoing disputes take the form of conflicts over their roles or positions on issues of school development and operations. In general, important are the functions attributed to conflicts as both positive (functional, constructive) and negative (dysfunctional, destructive),[9] with the prevailing view being in favour of their negativity but also as an essential tool for the improvement and development of an organization.[10] However, the consequences of the conflicts depend on how organizational conflicts are managed and ultimately resolved. How the situation is handled determines whether the conflict will be creative or destructive, profitable or damaging, friendly or hostile to the school and its environment (students, staff, parents). Successful administrative intervention may not eliminate conflict, but it is expected that the intervention will produce positive rather than negative effects on the unit.[11] In other words, conflicts will always be an issue for the administration and managing them can bring results in terms of consequences for both teachers and the school.[12] It is therefore a crucial point of investigation and search for solutions to avoid or even solve it in the school environment.

The aim of this study was therefore to assess the degree of correlation between the empowering type of leadership of kindergarten's directors/leaders and the possible presence of conflict among teachers.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Study setting, design, and participants

A cross-sectional survey was applied between February and March 2025 to 220 kindergarten teachers of 190 public kindergartens in the prefecture of Heraklion, Crete, Greece. Specifically, of the total of 438 kindergartens in Crete with approximately 1,700 teaching staff, the target population consisted of 205 kindergartens of the Regional Unit of Heraklion (46.8% or approximately 730 teachers).[13] No inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied but instead all teachers serving in the selected pre-school units were invited to participate. The response rate was low or approximately 30% (220/730), confirming other similar studies with whole selection of teachers (primary schools or kindergartens) that showed participation by network invitation (e-mails, Google Forms, etc.) ranged from 19.4% to 47.3%.[14–16] Prospective kindergarten teachers participating in the study were informed about the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity of the results, their right to withdraw at any time without justification, etc. The approval of the research was made with the submission of the proposal in October 2024 to the Board of the Department of Preschool Education at University of Crete.

Data collection procedure

The teachers' participation was accompanied by data collection using a structured self-completed anonymous questionnaire designed for this research. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

The first included closed-ended questions regarding schools, demographic, social and work characteristics of teachers (school, gender, age, years of experience, physical and mental health, job satisfaction, etc.).

The second section included the Empowering Leadership Scale (ELS) which consists of ten questions/statements, with a 7-point Likert response scale (1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree).[4,17] The degree of Empowering Leadership is assessed by aggregating the responses to the 10 statements and calculating a single score ranging from 10 to 70, where higher values (close to 70) determine higher empowerment. Those teachers who scored between 50 and 70 on the scale were identified as those who valued the presence of empowering leadership in their school, while those who scored <50 were considered to value the absence of empowering leadership.[17] The consistency of responses across the entire scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and was found to be α=0.929 or excellent.

The third section included the Intragroup Conflict Scale (ICS) of Pearson and colleagues (2002), which consists of three questions, with a 5-point Likert response scale for the frequency of relevant workplace behaviours (1: Not at all, 2: Very little, 3: A little, 4: Quite, and 5: A lot or great deal).[17,18] The presence of conflict is estimated by calculating the average score of the three questions, where higher values (close to 5) determine the presence of higher

conflict. Furthermore, the presence of discrete conflicts is defined by responses 4 and 5 (quite and a lot) in at least one of the three statements of the scale.[17] The consistency of responses across the entire scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and was found to be α=0.942 or excellent.

Despite the assessment of individual scoring, for the sake of understanding, comparability and simplification, the scores of the two scales were transformed into a range of 0–100 (https://measuringu.com/converting-scales-to-100-points/), where values closer to 100 express to the maximum extent the characteristic of each scale.[19,20]

The questionnaire with the consent letter, was developed on a Google Form and sent electronically to the 190 kindergarten directorates, requesting that it be sent to their staff e-mails. After the 2nd week of informing and inviting participation in the survey, three reminders to disseminate and complete the form were followed by e-mail.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (IBM Corp released 2019, IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 25.0, IBM Corp, Armonk, NY). Frequency distributions of the 220 teachers' characteristics were estimated. Similarly, measures of position and dispersion were estimated for the scores of ELS and ICS and comparison between them was done using 95% confidence intervals (95% CI). Similarly, reliability of the scales was also estimated using Cronbach's α coefficient and the normality of their scores the Blom's method (QQ plot). A univariate correlation between them and the participants' characteristics was then performed through the non-parametric Spearman's method. The comparison of the ICS score against the presence of ELS was done using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney method. The acceptable level of significance was set at 0.05.

RESULTS

From the characteristics of the teachers (tab. 1), it can be seen that almost all of them were females (n=219) while the average age of all teachers was found to be 45.3 years or between 27 and 64 years old. In terms of family status, 79.5% reported being married and or living with a partner, with 74.1% having children of which 17.8% had three or more. As for their level of education, 5.9% reported holding a second Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree while half of the teachers or 50.0% reported holding or working on a Master of Science (MSc) degree and 3.2% a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). In professional positions, the majority or 65.5% were in a non-tenured/by contract/on replacement position and only 34.5% were in a tenured position. In terms of position of responsibility, a total of 28.6% (n=63) reported serving in a related position (directors or supervisors), while in terms of financial status, the majority or 52.3% described it as moderate, 42.3% as good or very good and only 5.4% as poor to very poor. With respect to years of working experience also, overall in the field of education they were found with a mean of 17.1 years and only 6.1 years in the kindergartens they already serve. The mean number of teachers per school was also found as 8 or with a minimum of 1 and maximum 23 (result not shown in table). From their self-assessment score of work satisfaction, the mean score on a range of 1–10 was rated at 7.9 or higher. In their health status, with 2+ chronic conditions were found the 9.1% of teachers as the 10.0% reported having poor to moderate health.

The way a conflict is managed determines whether its outcome will be constructive or destructive. Table 2 presents the levels of the scores of the Empowering Leadership and Intra-group Conflict Scales. On a score range of 0–100, Empowering Leadership is assessed with increased mean levels (69.9/100) and low mean levels for Intragroup Conflict (26.4/100). Although these scales express different subject domains, significantly higher mean levels are assessed for Empowering Leadership compared to Intragroup Conflict ($p<0.001$). As depicted in figure 1, the presence of Empowering Leadership appears to be reported by 63.6% of the teachers, while Intragroup Conflicts is significantly lower, with only 18.2% reporting its presence ($p<0.05$).

Table 3 presents the correlations between the two scales and various teachers' characteristics. The increased presence of Empowering Leadership appears to be associated with a lower presence of Intragroup Conflict (rho=-0.272, $p<0.05$), teachers of lower age (rho=-0.148, $p<0.05$) or being married/living with a partner (rho=0.171, $p<0.05$), higher work satisfaction (rho=0.402, $p<0.05$) or working in kindergartens with higher number of teachers (rho=0.186, $p<0.05$). Increased presence also of Intragroup Conflict was associated with higher educational level of teachers (rho=0.135, $p<0.05$) or those with lower work satisfaction (rho=-0.189, $p<0.05$). It is noteworthy that no significant association was found between position of responsibility (serving as directors or supervisors) and the levels' score of the two scales ($p>0.05$).

Finally, in the table 4 the comparison of Empowering Leadership Scale's score in relation to presence/absence of Intragroup Conflict is presented. It was found that teachers who demonstrate the presence of Intragroup Conflict in relation to counterparts recorded significantly lower mean scores of Empowering Leadership (59.2 versus 72.2, respectively, $p<0.001$).

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of 220 kindergartens' teachers, participants in current study.

		n	%
Gender	Females/males	219/1	99.5/0.5
Age (years)	Mean±SD (min, max)	45.3±9.9	(27, 64)
Family status	Unmarried, divorced	45	20.5
	Married, living with partner	175	79.5
Children	No/yes	57/163	25.9/74.1
Number of children	1	40	24.5
	2	94	57.7
	3+	29	17.8
Education	With a BSc degree	90	40.9
	With a second BSc degree	13	5.9
	MSc	110	50.0
	PhD	7	3.2
Professional position	Tenured	76	34.5
	Non-tenured/by contract/on replacement	144	65.5
Position of responsibility in schools	No/yes	157/63	71.4/28.6
Financial status of family	Very poor, poor	12	5.4
	Moderate	115	52.3
	Good, very good	93	42.3
Years of total working experience	Mean±SD	17.1±9.6	
Years of working experience at kindergarten	Mean±SD	6.1±6.8	
Work satisfaction (score 1 to 10 as 10: high satisfaction)	Mean±SD	7.9±1.6	
*Morbidity (chronic conditions)**	None	117	53.2
	1	83	37.7
	2+	20	9.1
Subjective health status	Poor health	1	0.5
	Moderate	21	9.5
	Good	92	41.8
	Very good	94	42.7
	Excellent	12	5.5

*Morbidity estimation was based on eight chronic conditions as referred to have diagnosed by physician (hypertension, diabetes mellitus, hypercholesterolemia, heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis, cancer, mental and thyroid disease)

BSc: Bachelor of Science, MSc: Master of Science, PhD: Doctor of Philosophy, SD: Standard deviation

Table 2. Score levels of Empowering Leadership Scale (ELS) and Intragroup Conflict Scale (ICS) of 220 kindergartens' teachers.

Scales	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	Skewness
Empowering Leadership (ELS) (higher score or close to 100 → higher empowerment)	69.9	20.5	73.3	0.0	100.0	-0.87
Intragroup Conflict (ICS) (higher score or close to 100 → higher conflict)	26.4	25.9	16.7	0.0	100.0	0.89

Mann-Whitney test: $p<0.001$

SD: Standard deviation

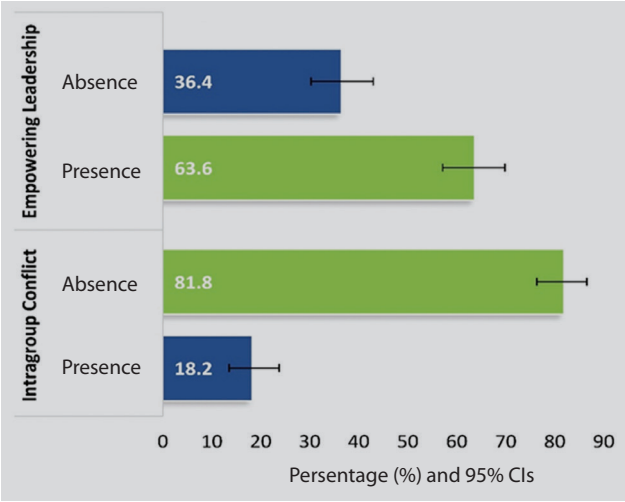


Figure 1. Frequency of presence of Empowering Leadership and Intragroup Conflict at kindergartens, according to the perceptions of the 220 kindergartens' teachers participating in current study. CI: Confidence interval.

DISCUSSION

According to current knowledge, most of the research efforts on issues of leadership evaluation and potential conflicts in schools of primary education in Greece, mainly concern primary schools (e.g. "dimotika"). The lack of relevant reports on kindergartens makes the comparison with the results of the present study limited; however, it is indicative even with research on lower/upper secondary schools (e.g. "gymnasium" and "lyceum"). In a general context and in terms of the investigation of current study, increased levels of Empowering Leadership were initially assessed. However, the most common forms of leadership examine dare related to avoidance, compromise, collaboration-integration, forcing-competing or smoothing-accommodating and which may cause conflicts.[21,22] Although in the present study an attempt was made to determine both the levels of Empowering Leadership and its presence/absence, most studies attempt to correlate it with other factors such as conflict, teacher well-being, job

Table 4. Comparison of Empowering Leadership scale's score in relation to presence of Intragroup Conflict in 220 kindergartens' teachers participating in current study.

	Intragroup Conflict		p-value
	Absence (n=180)	Presence (n=40)	
	Mean (median)		
Empowering Leadership (higher score → higher empowerment)	72.2 (75.0)	59.2 (65.0)	<0.001

Mann-Whitney test

Table 3. Univariate correlation coefficients of score levels of Empowering Leadership Scale (ELS), Intragroup Conflict Scale (ICS) and characteristics of the 220 kindergartens' teachers.

	Empowering Leadership (higher score → higher empowerment)	Intragroup Conflict (higher score → higher conflict)
	rho-Spearman	
Intragroup Conflict (higher score → higher conflict)	-0.272*	
Age (years)	-0.148*	-0.039
Family status (1: Unmarried, divorced, 2: Married, living with partner)	0.171*	-0.095
Children (1: No, 2: Yes)	0.040	-0.021
Education (1: With a BSc degree, 2: With a second BSc degree, 3: MSc, 4: PhD)	0.002	0.135*
Professional position (1: Tenured, 2: Non-tenured/by contract/on replacement)	-0.057	0.065
Position of responsibility in schools (1: No, 2: Yes)	-0.047	-0.068
Financial status of family (1: Very poor, poor, 2: Moderate, 3: Good, very good)	0.090	-0.040
Years of total working experience	-0.082	-0.062
Years of working experience at kindergarten	-0.049	0.023
Teachers at kindergarten (number)	0.186*	0.002
Work satisfaction (score 1 to 10 as 10: High satisfaction)	0.402*	-0.189*
Morbidity (number of chronic conditions)	0.064	0.067
Subjective health status (1: Poor health, 2: Moderate, 3: Good, 4: Very good, 5: Excellent)	0.093	-0.119

* p<0.05

BSc: Bachelor of Science, MSc: Master of Science, PhD: Doctor of Philosophy

satisfaction, isolation and ostracism, etc.[8,23–25] It appears to act as a critical workplace resource providing employees with autonomy, participation in decision-making and opportunities for professional development. These resources help to mitigate the adverse effects of high work demands, such as emotional and psychological strain. When teachers perceive that their directors empower them, they are more likely to feel valued and supported, which enhances their resilience to stressors and promotes higher levels of wellbeing, and quality of life, related with work.[23,25]

This study also found Empowering Leadership to be associated with less presence of Intergroup Conflict, with higher number of teachers per school, the younger teachers' ages, or with increased work satisfaction ($p<0.05$). In contrast, in a study by in China of 204 primary and secondary schools' teachers, Empowering Leadership was not found to be related to the age of the teachers nor to the category (education) of the schools and thus the number and work status of the teachers.[26]

Regarding Intergroup Conflict, it was observed from current study that it was at low levels in kindergartens. Also, Empowering Leadership was found to be associated with lower presence of Intragroup Conflict. Complementarily and in the context of strengthening the findings of the present analysis, schools with presence of Intragroup Conflict indicated a significantly lower level of Empowering Leadership ($p<0.001$). Despite methodological limitations or differences with the relevant literature, Chandolia and Anastasiou (2020) found from 128 secondary school teachers that 38.3% of participants reported conflicts with school director.[21] In the present study, the frequency of attendance was respectively reported by 18.2% as intragroup and always in relation to the form of leadership that was asked to be evaluated by the kindergarten education staff. This difference in the frequency of conflicts is obviously due to the level of education (e.g., school capacity, number and age of pupils, school environment, the time during the school year), but the most important is the presence of conflicts per se.[27–29] For there to be conflicts between teachers, either among themselves or with school leadership/directors, is obviously due to many factors. In paradox, however, it appeared that higher educational level of teachers (expressed as more bachelors/degrees) seems to contribute positively in creating conflicts. It is likely that the motivations of personal values and priorities may work more in this direction, causing conflicts due to the roles that are claimed or unclear within the teachers' association of the school.[29]

However, an important element is also the work satisfaction (it is noted that it was found at high levels in the present study), which is indirectly due to the lack of burnout of teachers, the optimal school climate or the different styles of leadership, depending on the size of the school unit. For example, the presence of role conflict and ambiguity in primary school teachers has been evaluated in conjunction with the depressive symptomatology and burnout they experience, highlighting that Greek teachers experience low to moderate levels of burnout, mental illness (such as depression), conflict and role ambiguity that apparently also explain work satisfaction.[30–33] Similarly, Wahyuti and Boussanlègue (2025)[1] report that school directors who implemented empowering leadership can foster a positive work climate, enhance a sense of responsibility and improve the quality of teaching, ultimately contributing to increased performance and teachers' satisfaction. It is now accepted by primary school teachers that conflicts have a negative impact on themselves and of course on their school unit.[10]

As in any research effort, current study accordingly contains both disadvantages and advantages that need to be evaluated. A key parameter of the impartiality and generalizability of the conclusions is the method of selecting participants and ensuring that the selection conditions are within the framework of randomness. Although in the current survey all the teachers of the public kindergartens of the Regional Unit of Heraklion were asked to participate (total selection), an estimated 30% participated. This low rate participation obviously weakens the power or external validity of the current study, but it is a common phenomenon as described in the relevant literature.[14–16] Some barriers relate to "general refusal", "lack of time" or "lack of interest".[34,35] Also an important point of further investigation is the search for and the degree of presence of incentives (goal setting) by the leadership of the school unit, with the ultimate goal of improving the performance of teachers in teaching and the performance of their duties at school.[1]

In conclusion, the aim of this study was to assess the degree of correlation between the empowering type of leadership demonstrated by the kindergartens' directors/leaders, as perceived by teachers, and the possible presence of conflicts among them. Thus, a strong empowering leadership was recorded, with the presence of conflict found to a low degree and associated with a lower presence of empowering leadership. The characteristics of empowering leadership can be an application of conflict resolution frameworks, with teacher training in effective communication and promotion of collaboration through restorative practices, for the harmonious functioning of kindergartens. School directors should adopt strategies that prioritize open communication, neutrality and empathy to ensure conflict control.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Διερεύνηση της σχέσης της ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας και της παρουσίας συγκρούσεων μεταξύ εκπαιδευτικών σε νηπιαγωγεία της Κρήτης

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ΣΚΟΠΟΣ Εκτίμηση του βαθμού συσχέτισης του ενδυναμωτικού τύπου ηγεσίας των διευθυντών(ντριών) νηπιαγωγείων, με την πιθανή παρουσία συγκρούσεων μεταξύ των εκπαιδευτικών. **ΥΛΙΚΟ-ΜΕΘΟΔΟΣ** Η έρευνα πραγματοποιήθηκε κατά το χρονικό διάστημα Φεβρουαρίου-Μαρτίου 2025 σε 220 εκπαιδευτικούς 190 δημόσιων νηπιαγωγείων του νομού Ηρακλείου Κρήτης. Συμπλήρωσαν δομημένο ερωτηματολόγιο που περιλάμβανε τις σταθμισμένες κλίμακες της ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας και της ενδοομαδικής σύγκρουσης. Η βαθμολογία τους καθορίστηκε σε κλίμακα 0–100 και με τη χρήση του λογισμικού προγράμματος Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), έκδοση 25.0 έγινε αξιολόγηση των συσχετίσεων μεταξύ τους αλλά και με τα χαρακτηριστικά των συμμετεχόντων, με τις μη παραμετρικές μεθόδους Spearman και Mann-Whitney. **ΑΠΟΤΕΛΕΣΜΑΤΑ** Οι 219 από τους συμμετέχοντες ήταν γυναίκες, ενώ η μέση ηλικία όλων βρέθηκε στα 45,3 έτη. Το 50% δήλωσαν κάτοχοι ή σε εκπόνηση μεταπτυχιακού διπλώματος ειδίκευσης. Στη θέση εργασίας, το 55% ήταν νηπιαγωγοί τμημάτων και το 56,9% δήλωσαν ότι εργάζονταν στην εκπαίδευση για >15 έτη. Η ενδυναμωτική ηγεσία εκτιμήθηκε με υψηλά μέσα επίπεδα βαθμολογίας (69,9/100), ενώ η ενδοομαδική σύγκρουση με χαμηλά μέσα επίπεδα (26,4/100) ($p<0,05$). Η αυξημένη παρουσία της ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας σχετιζόταν με μικρότερη παρουσία ενδοομαδικής σύγκρουσης ($rho=-0,272$, $p<0,05$), ενώ παράλληλα οι συμμετέχοντες που κατέδειξαν παρουσία ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας έναντι των υπολοίπων κατέγραψαν και σημαντικά χαμηλότερα μέσα επίπεδα βαθμολογίας ενδοομαδικής σύγκρουσης (21,7 έναντι 34,8, αντίστοιχα, $p<0,001$). **ΣΥΜΠΕΡΑΣΜΑΤΑ** Έντονη διαπιστώνεται η ενδυναμωτική ηγεσία σε νηπιαγωγεία της Κρήτης, με την παρουσία συγκρούσεων να ανιχνεύεται σε χαμηλό βαθμό και σχετιζόμενη με μικρότερη παρουσία ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας. Τα χαρακτηριστικά της ενδυναμωτικής ηγεσίας μπορεί να αποτελέσουν έναυσμα για την εφαρμογή πλαισίων επίλυσης συγκρούσεων, με την επιμόρφωση του προσωπικού στην αποτελεσματική επικοινωνία και στην προώθηση της συνεργασίας μέσω πρακτικών αποκατάστασης, για την αρμονική λειτουργία των νηπιαγωγείων.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Εκπαιδευτικοί, Ενδυναμωτικού τύπου ηγεσία, Νηπιαγωγείο, Συγκρούσεις

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