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PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP – A STUDY FROM TWO PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS

*Alexandre Ventura, Jorge A. Costa, António Neto-Mendes
and Patrícia Castanheira**

1. INTRODUCTION

The present research was undertaken with the main purpose to find out the degree of agreement and disagreement between the teachers and the principals regarding the principals' view of themselves and the teachers' perceptions of the principals. The guiding assumption for this project was that the effectiveness of a leader depends, among other factors, on how others view him/her as a leader. This kind of research has been until now marked by its paucity in Portugal.

To allow a better understanding of the context in which this piece of research has been undertaken we will describe the education system of Portugal. In spite of some progress in the last decades towards greater school autonomy (Barroso, 2003) the public education system is, still, a highly centralized-bureaucratic one. It is organized according to a model whose main characteristics are defined at the Ministry of Education, in Lisbon, which is responsible for national education policies, the curricula in force and programmes, among other aspects (see Appendix 1). The administrative structure of the Ministry of Education consists, in addition to other units, of central departments with the task of formulating policy in the pedagogic level. Basic Law 46/86, dated 14 October 1986, governs the Portuguese education system and ensures that education is universal, compulsory and free of charge for nine years, for all children. Compulsory education is offered from 6 to 15 years of age, covering the 3 cycles of basic education (see Appendix 2 at the end of this paper).

Secondary Education – public and private – is optional and consists of a three-year cycle which begins after the three cycles of basic education. Access is gained through the Certificate of Basic Education. As can be seen, the term Secondary Education, in Portugal, corresponds to what in Europe is currently called Upper Secondary Education. This level of education is structured in different ways to cater for General Courses aimed at those wanting to continue on to Higher Education and Technological Courses aimed at those seeking to enter the labour market. Permeability between the two programmes of study is guaranteed. Each of these courses lasts three years, corresponding to the 10th, 11th and 12th years of schooling (Portugal, 2003a).

A Secondary Education Diploma is awarded to students who complete secondary schooling and allows the student to apply for a place in higher education. In addition to this diploma, the technological courses taught as part of regular education and artistic education, vocational courses, technical and technological courses for adults also lead to a level 3 vocational qualification.

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To facilitate the understanding of the shape of the Portuguese educational system, we will also provide some data about some of the major characteristics, excluding higher education, for the continental part of the country in the school year of 2003-2004. There are 15.129 schools for different levels of education. The public education has 12.701 schools with 145.057 teachers and the private education has 2.428 schools with 26.683 teachers. The ratio students/teacher, at the public education level is 14,7 for pre-school, 9,3 for basic education, 8,2 for secondary education and 5,7 for vocational education (Portugal 2003b: 44).

Currently, Portuguese schools are run under the law 115/A of May 4th 1998. According to this law, there are four management bodies at a school: the School's Assembly, the Executive Council or Director (the schools can choose between a collegial body and a single person body), the Pedagogical Council and the Administrative Council (see Appendix 3). The School's Assembly is a representative body of the whole education community and it generates the guidelines for the whole school's operations. The Executive Council, or the Director, is the body or person which is responsible for the administration and management of the school in the pedagogical, cultural, administrative and financial areas. The Pedagogical Council is the body which coordinates and governs the pedagogical and didactical issues of the school. The Administrative Council is responsible for the administrative and financial matters.

In Portugal, the principal is a teacher of the school with, at least, 5 years of teaching experience, and with specialized training in school administration (or, as an alternative, with previous experience in school management). The principal is elected by the school's election board (which is composed of all the teachers and staff and of parents' and students' representatives). Therefore, the principal is not a management professional, but a teacher who is elected for a 3-year period at the end of which he/she will return to teaching (unless he/she runs for the position and is re-elected).

Management literature suggests that the views from subordinates can be used as a development tool for the evaluation of managers and leaders in the extent that a person's power depends, up to a certain point, of the way he/she is perceived by others (Yukl, 1989: 8)g. The drift to more qualitative research approaches in the 1980s considering "the leader as a manager of meaning has led to an awareness that the ways in which this process occurs requires in-depth understanding of particular cases and detailed probing among both leaders and subordinates of aims and impacts" (Bryman, 1996: 287-288). Several researchers, mainly in the fields of Education and Human Resources describe programs with evaluation or transformational purposes in which subordinates, or associates, give feedback about their leaders, or managers, and have created various "forms of multisource or multirater assessment methods in organizations" (Church and Bracken, 1997: 149). One of the most used forms is 360-degree feedback (Church and Bracken, 1997; Manatt, 1997; Bettenhausen and Fedor, 1997; Halverson, *et al.*, 2002). Multisource or 360-degree feedback is a process by which "managers receive various ratings from a variety of sources" (Luthans and Farner, 2002: 784). The leadership program, at FIAT, Italy, portrayed by Auteri (1994), aims at improving performance and productivity by taking a hard look at how managers are viewed by subordinates, and to redefine their role. Although 360-degree feedback cannot be considered a solution for every problem, its use can help "to gain agreement on expectations, by using a broader range of information and by facilitating open discussion" (Lepsinger and Anntoinette, 1997: 66). In the last years, the 360-degree feedback has also become attractive to schools. One of the aspects that has increasingly been a topic of concern is the evaluation of principals by their subordinates (Crisci, *et al.*, 1991; London, *et al.*, 1997; Davis and Hensley, 1999; Thomas, *et al.*, 2000).

This piece of research emanated from a similar project undertaken by Pashiardis (2001) in Cyprus. The same underlying (and guiding) assumption for this project was in mind as with the project in Cyprus: that the effectiveness of a leader depends on how others view him/her as a leader and on how the principals themselves perceive their leadership style. Principals have some ideas about themselves and the way they lead their schools. They perform their duties based on these ideas and also based on their perceptions of themselves as leaders. If the views of the principal match the views of the staff the functioning of the school is smooth; if these views, however, are divergent then there are problems and disfunctionalities in the day-to-day operations of the school. This discrepancy of views and perceptions is usually to the detriment of the school and its students since people act in different ways according to their own perceptions about what is happening in the school. It is, therefore, important to find out whether the teachers' views are in congruence with those of the principal regarding the principal's leadership and management of the school.

2. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The methodology used in this piece of research was a mixed one combining qualitative and quantitative methods. More specifically, the questionnaire used in the Pashiardis (2001) project was utilized in Portugal after changing it slightly for local conditions and taking into consideration the specific circumstances of school leadership in Portugal. The questionnaire (see Appendix 4) included 57 items which were grouped under the following nine areas: School Climate, School Leadership and Management, Curriculum Development, Personnel Management, Administration and Financial Management, Student Management, Professional Development and In-Service, Relations with Parents and the Community, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making. The scale used is an interval, Likert-type scale from 1 to 5, where 4 indicates that the principal "always" behaves in the way described by a certain questionnaire item, 3 indicates "often", 2 indicates "sometimes", and 1 indicates "never". An option was given to respondents for a "no opinion" response with number 5. For the statistical analysis of the collected data the "SPSS for Windows 12.0" was used.

We chose two schools – one in the town and the other on the suburban area of the same town. Both principals have around 15 years of experience running schools. The principal of the school in the town is a man and the principal of the school in the suburban area is a woman.

The questionnaire was placed inside a stamped envelope, together with a smaller envelope, with the return address already printed on it. These sets of envelopes were provided to the school principals in order to be distributed to the teachers. The principals, then, gave the sets to the front desk receptionist so that the questionnaires could be provided to the teachers as they came in to the school. The distribution process was monitored by using a checklist with the teachers' names. Thus, we were assured that all the teachers had received the questionnaire. As a matter of fact, due to the sensitivity of the issue, and bearing in mind the specific Portuguese school tradition and culture, we have chosen a distribution methodology which guarantees the delivery, but not necessarily the return of the questionnaires.

The response rate was about 30 percent in the school of the town and 70 percent in the school of the suburban area. This result is considered good enough to be able to make some useful and representative observations with regards to the views of the teachers versus the views of the principal.

Also, in this study, the ethnographic approach to leadership was used (Gronn and Ribbins, 1996), i.e., observing, shadowing and interviewing the principals. In a way, a multiperspective

approach was used following Argyris' (1982) distinction between espoused theories and theories-in-use in order to find out whether what the principals say they do is what is actually perceived as what it is they do. After the questionnaires were collected, the semi-structured interview process began with the principal. This digitally recorded interview with the principal occurred in a relatively informal, relaxed style and took about 40 minutes. The areas of the interview protocol were identical to those of the questionnaire (Appendix 4) in order to be able to make certain comparisons and draw some conclusions about possible discrepancies between what the teachers perceived and what the principals thought of themselves.

Further, following Seddon's (1993) distinction of context between categorical, interpretive, and relational, we would argue that this research tries to construe meanings within the interpretive or constructivist approach of context. It is hoped that through comparison and contrast of all the available evidence, we should be able to arrive to more objective accounts on the principalship. In the case presented in this study, the researchers spent a total of about 2 hours with each principal interviewing them and shadowing them on various aspects covered by the questionnaire. The conclusions are based on the interview with the principals and the school teachers' responses to the questionnaire.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of our study was to find out the degree of agreement and disagreement between the teachers and the principal regarding the principals' view of themselves and the teachers' perceptions of them. The results we found – see Table 1 (for a concise version) and Appendix 5 (for a detailed version) – indicate that there is a high level of agreement between the principals' views and the teachers' views. We can state that there are only a small number of areas where there is some disagreement between the views of the teachers and the views of the principals. Followers have a positive view of the performance of their leaders in both cases. The gender of the principal is not a significative variable. The two higher scoring areas for both schools are Administration and Financial Management. The lower scoring area is People Management. There are some plausible explanations for these results.

Table 1: Results of the questionnaire (concise version)

School in the suburban area	School in the town
I – School Climate (Average: 3.41)	I – School Climate (Average : 3.56)
Lowest scoring item – 5 (3.12)	Lowest scoring item – 3 (3.32)
Highest scoring item – 4 (3.90)	Highest scoring item – 7 (3.75)
II –School Leadership and Management (Average: 3.30)	II – School Leadership and Management (Average : 3.37)
Lowest scoring item – 11 (3.04)	Lowest scoring item – 11 (2.88)
Highest scoring item – 15 (3.71)	Highest scoring item – 15 (3.74)
III – Curriculum Development (Average: 3.30)	III – Curriculum Development (Average : 3.30)

Lowest scoring item – 19 (3.07)	Lowest scoring item – 17 (3.12)
Highest scoring item – 18 (3.48)	Highest scoring item – 18 (3.52)
IV – People Management (Average: 1.70)	IV – People Management (Average : 2.11)
Lowest scoring item – 21 (1.23)	Lowest scoring item – 21 (1.18)
Highest scoring item – 23 (2.03)	Highest scoring item – 24 (2.50)
V – Administration and Financial Management (Average: 3.70)	V – Administration and Financial Management (Average : 3.81)
Lowest scoring item – 29 (3.36)	Lowest scoring item – 29 (3.59)
Highest scoring item – 25 (3.92)	Highest scoring item – 26 (3.97)
VI – Students Management (Average: 3.74)	VI – Students Management (Average : 3.51)
Lowest scoring item – 39 (3.12)	Lowest scoring item – 36 (3.31)
Highest scoring item – 35 (3.82)	Highest scoring item – 35 (3.85)
VII – Profes. Development and In-Service Training (Average: 3.47)	VII – Profes. Development and In-Service Training (Average: 3.42)
Lowest scoring item – 44 (3.16)	Lowest scoring item – 44 (3.34)
Highest scoring item – 43 (3.77)	Highest scoring item – 43 (3.50)
VIII – Relationships with Parents and Community (Average: 3.46)	VIII – Relationships with Parents and Community (Average: 3.48)
Lowest scoring item – 49 (3.26)	Lowest scoring item – 49 (3.23)
Highest scoring item – 51 (3.79)	Highest scoring item – 51 (3.80)
IX – Problem Solving and Decision-Making (Average: 3.19)	IX – Problem Solving and Decision-Making (Average: 3.49)
Lowest scoring item – 53 (3.01)	Lowest scoring item – 52 (3.23)
Highest scoring item – 56 (3.42)	Highest scoring item – 55 (3.76)

First, the highly democratic and consensus type of leadership profile of principalship in Portugal allows everybody to get the chance to be included and to know what others think.

Secondly, there is the principals' ample and diversified experience with administration matters which give them a holistic perspective and approach to leadership. This, coupled with the fact that they both have specialized training for leadership positions in school administration gives them an added perspective on how to run their schools in a democratic way.

Third, we must admit that these principals are very self-conscious and very objective in their views with regards to their leadership style. They also have a very clear notion of what teachers think of them as principals.

Fourth, these principals, with around twenty years of teaching experience, know the teachers' culture and the intrinsic characteristics of teachers' work (Mendes, 1999) extremely well and this opens the way to a better relationship with them.

Finally, we should not forget the way that the public school principals are elected in Portugal. These principals were not assigned to this post by any administrative structure outside the school and, as such, they are seen as one of the teachers.

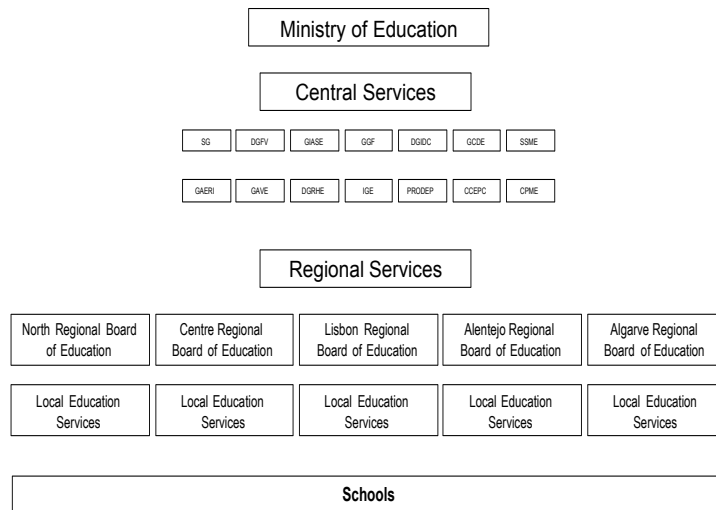
Therefore, the existence of a high level of collegiality in the management of Portuguese schools (Costa, 1996) seems to be an important feature when we try to explain the large degree of agreement we found in the views of the teachers and of the principals on their leadership style. Even though we cannot generalize from this small sample, we believe that in Portuguese public schools there is a certain sense of “consensual management” style, which is closer to the main interests of the teachers, rather than closer to the interests of other participants in school life. The principal is often seen as a peer by the teachers. This mixed profile tends to generate positive perceptions of the principal by the teachers and vice-versa. Consequently, sometimes we come across some softer leadership styles which are developed as a part of the collegial context of teaching and which do not interfere with some of the more sensitive areas such as teachers’ performance (especially in what regards their scientific, pedagogical and didactical abilities). In a centralized administrative structure such as the Portuguese educational system, school principals have a tendency to display a performance profile which is closer to that of a manager who takes care of the day-to-day management of the school’s operations. Moreover, school principals in Portugal give the impression that they mainly follow instructions given from the macro structural level (i.e., the Ministry of Education), rather than to being proactive and innovative leaders at the school unit level.

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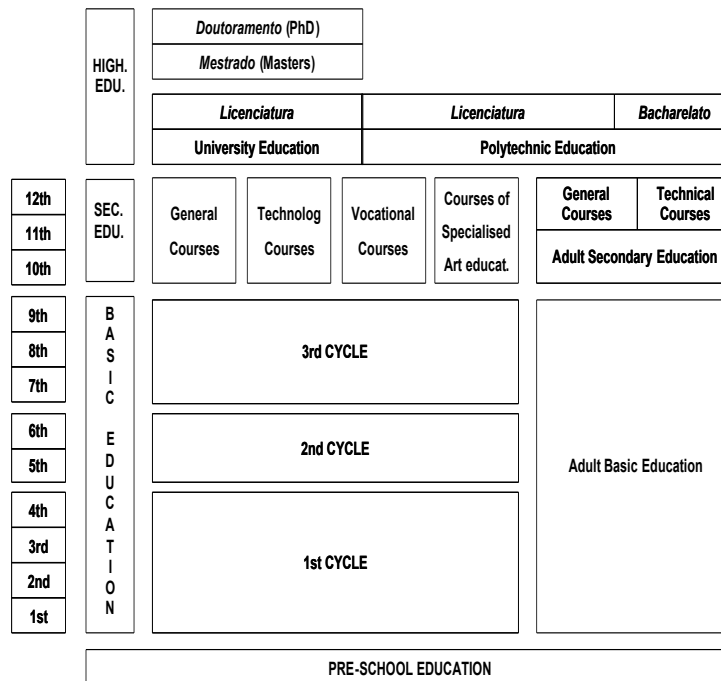
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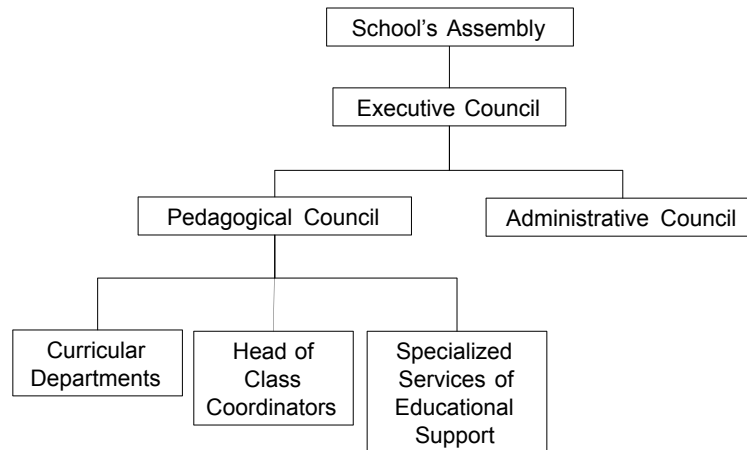
APPENDIX 1 – DIAGRAM OF THE PORTUGUESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM ADMINISTRATION



APPENDIX 2 – DIAGRAM OF THE PORTUGUESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM



APPENDIX 3 – DIAGRAM OF THE USUAL PORTUGUESE SCHOOL STRUCTURE



APPENDIX 4 – QUESTIONNAIRE

1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Always, 5 = No Opinion

I. School Climate

1. Clearly states the school's objectives.
2. Communicates and promotes high expectation levels for staff and student performance in an enabling, supportive way.
3. Provides recognition for excellence and achievement.
4. Leaves enough autonomy to teachers in order to organize and program their teaching.
5. Offers opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between groups, classes and lessons.
6. Mediates and facilitates effective resolution of conflicts in a timely fashion.
7. Promotes open communication and flexibility in relations with the staff as opposed to strict adherence to bureaucratic hierarchy.
8. Promotes an environment which facilitates learning and which is orderly and coherent with the school's goals.

II. School Leadership and Management

9. Cooperates with the staff's in creating a common vision for school improvement.
10. Encourages staff to be actively involved in the planning and implementation of this vision.
11. Presents his/her vision for the school to all educators in the school.
12. His/her values and vision are evident through the things he does, the way the principal spends his/her time and what he/she considers important.
13. Encourages a culture of innovation and experimentation.
14. His/her authority is presented through his/her knowledge and abilities instead of his/her position authority.
15. Closely cooperates and contributes to the work of the Ministry of Education.
16. Applies research findings to facilitate school improvement.

III. Curriculum Development

17. Develops actions for the adaptation of the curriculum to students' needs.
18. Provides instructional resources and materials to support teaching staff in accomplishing instructional goals.
19. Monitors systematically instructional processes to ensure that teaching activities are related to the expected outcomes.
20. Effectively administers and integrates all curricula taught in the school with the national curriculum.

IV. Personnel Management

21. Uses class observation to help the teachers' professional growth.
 22. Confers with subordinates regarding their professional growth; works jointly with them to develop and accomplish improvement goals.
 23. Uses a specific teacher observation instrument and ensures that evaluations clearly and accurately represent staff performance.
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24. Clearly defines expectations for staff performance regarding instructional strategies, classroom management and communication with the public.

V. Administration and Fiscal Management

25. Makes sure that different reports to the Ministry of Education are accurate and are timely submitted.
 26. Complies with educational policies, as well as laws and regulations.
 27. Is effective in scheduling activities and the use of resources needed to accomplish determined goals.
 28. Develops budgets based upon documented program needs, fiscal needs, personnel costs and operates within the given budget.
 29. Monitors the use, care and replacement of capital equipment.
 30. Manages all school facilities effectively; efficiently supervises their maintenance to ensure clean, orderly and safe buildings and grounds.
 31. Is punctual to meetings and gives attention to the discussion of the various issues raised in the meetings.

VI. Student Management

32. Effectively communicates to students, staff and parents school guidelines for student conduct.
 33. Insures that school rules are uniformly observed and that consequences of misconduct are applied equitably to all students.
 34. Effectively conducts conferences with parents, students and teachers concerning school and student issues, conveying both the positive aspects of student behavior as well as problem areas.
 35. Protects learning time from outside and unnecessary interruptions.
 36. Tries to implement such teaching methods where "higher order form of learning" is facilitated.
 37. Promotes the use of knowledge in a variety of forms.
 38. Promotes the interconnection of learning experiences in the school with practices which are followed outside the school.
 39. Encourages and he/she is a good example of life-long learning using new ideas as well as successes and failures as examples.
 40. Maintains and updates student folders.

VII. Professional Development and In-service

41. Uses information which accrues from school inspections and other teacher appraisal in order to improve personnel.
 42. Strives to improve leadership skills through self-initiated professional development activities.
 43. Utilizes information and insights gained in professional development programs for self-improvement.
 44. Disseminates ideas and information to other professionals; provides leadership in addressing the challenges facing the profession.

VIII. Relations with Parents and the Community

45. Encourages relations between the school on one hand and the community and parents on the other.
 46. Promotes cooperation with other organizations and businesses from the community so that students' needs are addressed.
 47. Creates such relations with the community and parents so that they are encouraged to participate in decision making within the school.
 48. Demonstrates awareness of school/community needs and initiates activities to meet those identified needs.
 49. Demonstrates the use of appropriate and effective techniques for community and parent involvement.
 50. Emphasizes and nurtures two-way communication between the school and community.
 51. Projects a positive image to the community.

IX. Problem-solving and Decision-making

52. Presents discussion and searching for solutions as commonly accepted practices within the school.
 53. Shares information and facilitates decision-making among all personnel.
 54. Solves problems in a cooperative way with teachers.
 55. Is open to different approaches and solutions and does not insist in any one way of solving problems.
 56. Tries to listen to many views and ideas before solving important problems.
 57. Implements decision-making processes which are participative as opposed to autocratic.

APPENDIX 5 – DETAILED RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

School in the suburban area	School in the town
I – School Climate	I – School Climate
General average: 3.41	General average: 3.56
1 – 3.41	1 – 3.40
2 – 3.18	2 – 3.47
3 – 3.17	3 – 3.32
4 – 3.9	4 – 3.72
5 – 3.12	5 – 3.5
6 – 3.55	6 – 3.72
7 – 3.45	7 – 3.75
8 – 3.52	8 – 3.65
II – School Leadership and Management	II – School Leadership and Management
General average: 3.30	General average: 3.37
9 – 3.38	9 – 3.54

10 – 3.14	10 – 3.35
11 – 3.04	11 – 2.88
12 – 3.26	12 – 3.26
13 – 3.08	13 – 3.41
14 – 3.35	14 – 3.57
15 – 3.71	15 – 3.74
16 – 3.50	16 – 3.23
III – Curriculum Development	III – Curriculum Development
General average: 3.30	General average: 3.30
17 – 3.43	17 – 3.12
18 – 3.48	18 – 3.52
19 – 3.07	19 – 3.26
20 – 3.25	20 – 3.33
IV – People Management	IV – People Management
General average: 1.70	General average: 2.11
21 – 1.23	21 – 1.18
22 – 1.92	22 – 2.39
23 – 2.03	23 – 2.40
24 – 1.63	24 – 2,5
V – Administration and Financial Management	V – Administration and Financial Management
General average: 3.70	General average: 3.81
25 – 3.92	25 – 3.84
26 – 3.91	26 – 3.97
27 – 3.58	27 – 3.80
28 – 3.71	28 – 3.82
29 – 3.36	29 – 3.59
30 – 3.56	30 – 3.79
31 – 3.89	31 – 3.90
VI – Students Management	VI – Students Management
General average: 3.74	General average: 3.51
32 – 3.53	32 – 3.70
33 – 3.61	33 – 3.72
34 – 3.36	34 – 3.33
35 – 3.82	35 – 3.85
36 – 3.16	36 – 3.31
37 – 3.26	37 – 3.38
38 – 3.15	38 – 3.4
39 – 3.12	39 – 3.5
40 – 3.51	40 – 3.40
VII – Profes. Development and In-Service Training	VII – Profes. Development and In-Service Training
General average: 3.47	General average: 3.42
41 – 3.47	41 – 3.48
42 – 3.48	42 – 3.37
43 – 3.77	43 – 3.5
44 – 3.16	44 – 3.34
VIII – Relationships with Parents and Community	VIII – Relationships with Parents and Community
General average: 3.46	General average: 3.48
45 – 3.51	45 – 3.52
46 – 3.41	46 – 3.47
47 – 3.41	47 – 3.4
48 – 3.41	48 – 3.38
49 – 3.26	49 – 3.23
50 – 3.47	50 – 3.56
51 – 3.79	51 – 3.80
IX – Problem Solving and Decision-Making	IX – Problem Solving and Decision-Making
General average: 3.19	General average: 3.49
52 – 3.06	52 – 3.23
53 – 3.01	53 – 3.33
54 – 3.10	54 – 3.42
55 – 3.36	55 – 3.76
56 – 3.42	56 – 3.69
57 – 3.22	57 – 3.55
