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ARTICLES

The challenging role of Early Childhood and Primary school teachers as counsellors: a literature review

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides insights into school counselling and professional development of Early Childhood and Primary school teachers. More specifically, teachers' role as counsellors in Greek education system is receiving significant attention as teachers are characterised with a multidimensional activity within and outside the school context. School counselling constitutes a key-priority in the continuous professional development of teachers as the school environment has changed and teachers have to be prepared to deal with matters that arise in multicultural classrooms or classrooms with students with special educational needs. Through this paper, the authors attempt to define the role of a school counsellor and focus on school counselling as a part of their life-long development as teachers, to meet the needs of their students and the demands that education of the 21st century has.

Keywords: teacher's role as counsellor, professional development, early childhood and primary education

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood and Primary school teachers' role as counsellors is becoming of great importance within the school context in Greece. In this literature review, the perceptions of Early Childhood and Primary school teachers of their role as counsellors are investigated. The basic mission of school is to contribute to a person's social, psychological and academic development according to 1566/1985 Law in Greece (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, 1985). Teachers' basic roles include educating, evaluating and, in recent years, consulting children. Their new roles stem from society and cultural changes, such as the globalization, the financial and cultural crisis, the immigration and the arrival of refugees, the unemployment, the fear of the isolation, the variety of family forms (Pliogou, 2016), and the rapid advancement of technology (Sidelinger, 2008). Schools are now multicultural environments, which are regarded as an educational mosaic, with students' emerging differentiated needs requiring teachers to become counsellors. Teachers need to be or become more open to innovation and more democratic and reflective professionals to be able to help and promote children's emotional and intellectual development at school (Moss, 2008).

Hence, there is an increasingly important need for cooperation in the light of new cooperative education models aiming at integration, psychosocial adaptation and psychological support of all pupils by counsellors specializing in multicultural issues (Koulouris-Antonopoulos, 2009). The teacher has to face the shortcomings and problems in everyday school practice, which are increasing due to the current socio-economic crisis, to teach effectively and to assess the performance of his/her students but rather to create a qualitatively upgraded counselling relationship with the students that will lead to smoother psychosocial development of young citizens thus performing his/her counselling role (Krivas, 2008).

Although there is no state legislation of the role of the teachers as "counsellors", thanks to their academic training but mainly because of their interest and their willingness to be fully supportive in the effort of their students to "balance" between their personal "wishes" and the social "must", the teachers perform the role of the advisor (Brouzos, 2009).

COUNSELLING – A LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of education is the formation of a conscious person with critical thinking, being able to cope with the ever changing world as well as the socialization of the child and its integration in the peers group that moves from the extended family, to the Kindergarten, to the Preschool Education and to the Primary school (UNESCO, 1996).

For this reason, the need for counselling and public school counselling is receiving special attention. As

"School Counselling" we define the sector through which the counselling at school is applied by a person specialised in the implementation of the school counselling in education, that is to say the counsellor or the specialised teacher, depending on the system. It is worth mentioning that the term usually refers to the application of Counselling in Primary and Secondary Education (Dimitropoulos, 1999).

Counselling is a continuous process to help people with emotional difficulties to cope with their problems, to adjust in a social environment, such as school, and to effectively deal with their psychological conflicts (Malikiosi-Loizos, 2011).

Nowadays, according to the European Network of Health Promoting Schools (IPC, 1999) teachers and students work together and take actions to benefit their physical, mental and social health. Teachers are often asked to consult on issues far and beyond the actual learning process. Their own perceptions of their roles affect both their attitudes towards counselling as well as students' uptake of further counselling if needed (Joy, Hesson & Harris, 2011). Moreover, issues that a counsellor-teacher has to cope with are found in the areas of vocational guidance, family and community cooperation (Brouzos, 2009).

Every student expects from his/her teacher to satisfy their curiosity, to understand his/her worries and help him/her find the right answers. Being a teacher means undertaking a mission, a mission to daily monitor the child's struggle for empowerment and completion. There are three key factors related to the performance of the teachers' duties. More specifically, these are the personality, the theoretical background and the experiences they themselves had as students. However, an important parameter should be into consideration, which is that each student, as well as each teacher, is a unique personality when a teaching methodology proposal tends to gain universal validity (Daniels & Bizar, 2005).

The will, however, for continuous improvement and development should be the final aim if what the teacher wants to have in his/her class is active students. Should the teachers want his/her students to work with dedication and patience, they should be the first ones to express their passion for knowledge and learning as well as to work hard and systematically. Such a teacher is not limited in offering only knowledge, but he/she also shapes the students' character and personality in a lasting struggle that does not stop at the confines of the classroom but it can arise in every opportunity out of it, affecting their choices (Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004).

A series of studies (examples include the: Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Hughes, Cavell & Jackson, 1999; Hughes, Cavell & Wilson, 2001) focused on the importance of the development of an emotional atmosphere at school, making it obvious that the relationship between teachers and students affect children's attitudes toward school, their adaptation to it and their academic performance. Indeed, through imitation, an innate tendency of the child according to Bandura (1986), the teacher can constitute a role-

model, a mentor and a counsellor, when characterised by credibility and is an important figure.

An inspired teacher besides being aware of the teaching-learning subject and its curriculum, he/she should be characterised with the attempt to understand the behavior of his/her students, to solve their problems and to use teaching techniques that could lead to problem-solving techniques. Moreover, he/she should be characterized with his/her attempt to create a positive learning environment that enhances motivation, learning and its sharing in other activities both within and outside the classroom as well (Brophy, n.d.). Also, he/she should provide continuous feedback on the students' efforts and performance, be fair and honest with his/her students, foster an authentic communication, praise every effort by respecting each student, enhance self-awareness and positive self-esteem, have a sense of humor, flexibility, self-control, increased empathy and carry out continuous self-assessment (Steele, 2009). In summary, however, the three fundamental requirements: a) empathy, b) appreciation and c) authenticity, i.e. the counsellor behavioral variables according to Rogers (Rogers, in Malikiosi-Loizos, 2001), are attitudes and actual lifestyles and not techniques. A person develops strength, which creates favorable prospects for individual and social change.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Counselling is a fundamental educational aspect and integral element of every education system. Indeed, among the priorities and the target actions of each country are the professional development and continuous learning. Professional development is an on-going, complex and multidimensional process, which reinforces perception of professional self and contributes to the development of knowledge, skills and practice in a complex and continuously changing learning environment. In fact, teachers' life is now characterised with their continuous professional development that is considered to be dynamic and constant. It is enhanced via experience and practice (Caena, 2011). It is, therefore, quite important to address both of these issues when investigating how teachers perceive their own role in the school framework.

Last years, Europe's main educational policies have given emphasis on the lifelong development and training of Early Childhood and Primary Education educators (Guskey, 2003). Also, all this is connected to ongoing changes concerning the education system per se. Teachers should be able raise their awareness about and adjust to current pedagogical approaches by being developed professionally (Garet et al., 2001).

Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers need to define again their professionalism and professional development in order to be able to be efficient and sufficient at school (Caena, 2011). According to the evolution of Social Sciences and Humanities, particular emphasis has been placed on the fact that appropriate support services are required in order for children to be able to communicate

and express their feelings towards others who share common experiences (Ifanti and Fotopoulou, 2011). It is important teachers be well educated, participating in lifelong learning programs and attend training programs in new technologies while they should also become familiar with new counselling trends in the education environment. Professional development according to Fullan (1995) is the outcome of formal and informal learning acquired by the teachers in a complex and continuously changing learning environment. Moreover, teachers in Greece have an integrated view of professional development and professionalism, both adding up to their need to gain more knowledge, more skills and be more involved in their everyday practice. For example, Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers are not only concerned with teaching but they feel that they have to serve as counselors to both students and parents (Pliogou, 2015).

In addition to, positive correlations between teacher quality and student achievement are very important factors within the framework of school explaining the academic performance. Studies have demonstrated the importance of teacher's professional development and its correlation to students' achievement (Desimone et al., 2002). For instance, fostering an active learning environment with plenty of opportunities by the teachers can serve beneficially to the development of students' motivation that can result in students' skills and achievements improvement. What is more, teachers at national and international level, find themselves unprepared teaching in classrooms with students with special educational needs or with students of different linguistic and cultural background. Therefore, it is vital they try to integrate students with special learning needs, both special difficulties and talents, in their classes. Further, the effective use of technology and communication can engage teachers in framework planning and in encouraging parents be engaged in school activities too. Taken all the above into consideration, it is obvious that only high qualified professionals can deal with the various needs of the diverse populations, involve parents and focus on their continuous professional development (Schleicher, 2012).

Furthermore, professional development is strongly correlated to the meaning of professional learning and professional growth (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid and Mckinney, 2007). Reflecting and focusing on the teaching approaches and methods and evaluating their own skills and knowledge are very crucial processes when teachers prepare and plan for the classroom while developing their decision-making skills and fostering a culture of collaboration within schools are another two proposed key factors (Hatzidimou, 2008). Early Childhood and Primary Education teachers acknowledge the importance of professionalism and professional development since their efficacy is significantly connected to their professional learning opportunities that can offer mastery and vicarious experiences resulting in teachers' personal development (Caena, 2011). As they state in relevant studies, they are basically concerned with their students' progress

while they realise that fostering collaboration and being engaged in the learning process to a great extend are more than necessary. It is also worth mentioning that research findings have indicated that mainly Early Childhood teachers tend to adopt democratic and holistic approaches and principles to enhance their professionalism (Fotopoulou, 2013).

Obtaining research, reflective and cooperative skills from teachers is a basic consideration and pursuit of teacher's educators, during the study of Early Childhood and Primary School teachers (Papandreou, Gregoriadis, Birbili, 2013).

According to the reflective practice, the aim of teacher education is: a) to equip them with the necessary theoretical background to understand and analyse the educational process data, to engage them in professional activities that help them develop, b) to cultivate their reflection crisis, their inquiry skills, the ability to converse, synthesize, to cooperate, to become aware and to participate in joint activities. The reflective analysis of the education practice allows the teachers to correlate the educational process with both the theoretical knowledge and the wider socio-political and cultural context. The sociocultural framework helps teachers to recognize the political dimension of education as an institution and the educational process itself (Pantazis, Sakellariou & Bakas, 2011). The purpose of the "practicum" is to gain a practical experience of the workplace, the obtaining and use of theoretical, research and thinking skills, to help them become familiar with a critical approach to both personal education practices, and working methods of other teachers (Androusou & Avgitidou, 2013).

Taking everything into account, the aim of teacher education today is to create reflective professionals who will strive daily to improve education practices with the aim of equal development of all students. It is important inspired teachers be trained so that they will constitute mentors of their students thanks to their attitude.

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