

Evaluating the innovative strategies in the Greek education system. The institution of edeays

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Abstract

Purpose: In the present study, the assessments of 20 primary school principals in Greece were analysed regarding the quality of their cooperation with school psychologists. The aim of this study is to highlight how school principals view the operation of the Interdisciplinary Educational, Evaluation and Support Committees (EDEAYs).

Results: The content analysis of the data collected resulted in specific issues to emerge, including the difficulty of determining the distinct roles of participants in an EDEAY, the lack of culture for interdisciplinary collaboration between those involved in educational processes, as well as variables that act as a deterrent to the integrated development of school psychological support strategies for students.

Keywords: Innovation and Education, School Psychological Support, Inclusive Education

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1 PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the coordinators of the School Networks of Educational Support (SDEYs) determine the services offered by the EDEAYs and their cooperation with psychologists, social workers and classroom teachers. In particular, this study aims to highlight the views of the principals of the primary education units on the operation of EDEAYs and the possible benefits for their school unit that result from the provision of school psychological support to the EDEAYs.

The individual objectives of the research were to explore the views of primary school principals regarding a) the philosophy of inclusive education and the operation of new integration processes in the school context; b) the distinct roles of those involved in EDEAYs; c) the key points in the shaping of cooperation between principals and school psychologists; d) the difficulties and possibilities of improving this cooperation.

The research questions were formulated based on these individual objectives and are the following:

- How is inclusive education defined in the Greek school environment?
- What are the integration applications for students with disabilities in school everyday life? - How are they valued?
- What is the distinct role of psychologists?
- How is the cooperation between principles and psychologists perceived?
- What are the key points that shape the cooperation between principals and school psychologists in the Greek educational system?
- What is the role of the Ministry of Education, the executives in Education, the teachers, the dedicated staff, the parents in the collaboration between managers and psychologists?
- What are the strengths of the cooperation between managers and psychologists for students with disabilities in Greece? What are the weaknesses and the proposed changes?

2 RESEARCH METHODS

To conduct this study in the field of Education, the use of the



quality method was considered more effective, thanks to the flexible way of implementing it and approaching the issue, and due to the limited sample available and the peculiarities of the way EDEAYs operate in the Greek education system. In an attempt to explore and evaluate the perception of the Principals who participated, we captured their experiences and views in the present period. We have no intention of generalizing the research results or drawing conclusions that are causally related to each other (Silverman, 2000).

For this research, the approach of social construction is followed, according to which reality is socially constructed and a consequence of the interaction of individuals. According to this approach, it is considered that most of the time the interaction between the active subjects leads to "realities" through negotiation and construction processes that relate to the given environment and are related to the specific culture (Wetherell & Still, 1998). Emphasis is placed on how the respective context and values determine the construction of social reality. Next, the notion of intersubjectivity is fundamental, that is the social conventions and the common culture that characterizes active subjects (Smith, 1998). In the context of this view, the researcher formulates questions, through the study and analysis of subjective judgments and actions, aiming to interpret the phenomena under study. The above theoretical approach, the research objectives and the research questions, therefore, defined the research tool we used, semi-structured interview (Anfara et al., 2002).

The main research was deliberate in terms of selecting the participants. The sample consisted of 20 primary schools Principals in the educational region of Central Macedonia during the school year 2017-2018. The sample was considered sufficient since the number of established EDEAYs is limited. Also, according to Iosifidis (2003), the relatively small sample of participants is justified in the context of conducting qualitative research because the focus is on the specific and in-depth meaning of what is said rather than on quantitative data that requires a larger sample size. The selection criteria for participating in this research were the following: a) Previous service of more than 4 years as Principal of a school unit, (in order to ensure the administrative experience); b) Participation of 8 women and 12 men (in order for the sample to be numerically balanced and for both sexes to be equally represented); c) Being a holder of a postgraduate degree in special education and training (so that they are scientifically relevant to the questions).

We used the semi-structured interview as a research tool. During the semi-structured interviews, there were a number of predefined questions as a "basis" which were flexible in terms of order and content based on the course of the discussion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, in the semi-structured interviews, the content and flow of the questions were determined by the researcher, but the respondents were given the opportunity to express their thoughts and describe their experiences in their own way (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The semi-structured interviews had an exploratory and interpretive purpose. The questions were chosen to be open so the answers are more spontaneous and unguided. Prior to data collection, it was considered appropriate to check the suitability of the interview guide. The pilot interview survey was conducted with a male elementary school Principal who, even though met the characteristics of the research subject,

would not participate in the survey due to retirement. This semi-structured interview helped to make the research questions more specific and also to determine their clarity. During the process, the use of the terms was checked and finalized. In particular, difficulties were identified regarding the comprehension of the questions and the duration of the interview, so the necessary changes were made. The pilot survey was conducted in July 2017, at the end of the school year prior to the year in which the main survey was conducted. Before the interviews took place, the researcher informed about the purpose of the research and assured the participants about the confidentiality of their data.

In order to check the reliability of the interview guide, other similar, mainly European, surveys were studied while a pilot application was carried out during the pilot phase of the research process. Then, the criterion of reliability of long experience and contact was ensured through the method of prolonged engagement. It is important to mention that the researcher used to work in Primary schools for a long time.

To check the validity of the interview guide, it was also presented to a school psychologist and a teacher, without stating the purpose of the research, in order to determine whether the guide can explore beliefs regarding the dominant educational policy in special education. In addition, for the same reason, the texts of the interviews were reviewed by the participants, who stated that their views were not misinterpreted, thus enhancing the validity of the survey data. Based on the general purpose, the individual objectives and the research questions, the thematic areas and the questions of the interview guide were formulated. Initially, there was a set of questions regarding the demographic data of each respondent, their grammar knowledge, their experiences regarding special education and the services they provided. In addition to the demographics, the thematic areas on which the interview questions were based and the interview guide was written were as follows:

Philosophies underlying inclusive education and the operation of new institutions in the school context.

1. What is the philosophy of inclusive education and what are the integration practices in a Greek school?
2. What is its history?
3. What is the dominant model regarding students with disability in Greece?
4. What is the application of inclusive education in school everyday life? How is it evaluated so far?

Distinct roles of those involved in EDEAYs

1. What are the roles laid down regarding the cooperation between managers and psychologists in EDEAYs?
2. How is the cooperation of those involved regarding school psychological support reflected?

Factors shaping the collaboration between principals and school psychologists

1. What are the factors that affect the cooperation between managers and psychologists in the context of an EDEAY?
2. What is the role of the Ministry, the competent bodies and the executives in Education?
3. What is the role of the school community?
4. What is the role of the teachers?
5. What is the role of the parents?

Improving the cooperation between managers and psychologists

1. What are the strengths of the cooperation between managers and psychologists?
2. What are the weaknesses?
3. What are the proposed changes?

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews was done qualitatively with the method of content analysis which is a qualitative method for secondary analysis. This analysis prioritises spontaneous answers, their interpretation and the methodical drawing of conclusions. Content analysis is associated with the use of semi-structured interviews (Stemler, 2001).

Qualitative content analysis was chosen for the present study because it facilitates the systematic and qualitative access of the messages of the interviews. Qualitative content analysis reinforces the view that the texts, i.e. the material to be analysed, operate within a specific socio-political, historical and ideological context, and thus reflect the assessments of specific social groups or classes (Krippendorff, 2018).

After the data was collected, we defined the analysis techniques. The recording unit was selected as the analysis unit. The subject, which is suitable for research drawing beliefs and attitudes (Stemler, 2001), was identified as the recording unit. Also, the use of the subject as a recording unit is considered appropriate for the thorough investigation and for highlighting as many aspects of the subject under consideration as possible. Then, the category-based induction was set up. With the constant comparative method, the relations between the categories were investigated and, in the cases where overlap between two categories was found, the smaller categories were merged into a larger one. Through content structuring, the data were indexed based on the units of analysis, classified by category and subcategory, and classified into (sub-)category with the paraphrasing technique (Iosifidis, 2003).

Finally, to enhance the reliability of the categorization method, data analysis was done by an additional researcher (Krippendorff, 2018). The coding criteria were then presented and yet another coder was appointed. The researcher and the coder each analysed separately but with the same coding criteria. The material was classified by category and subcategory. The reliability was checked through the test-test method and was based on agreement between coders. The minimum degree of agreement in the classification by category and subcategory between the researcher and the coder was estimated at 0.87. The agreement was calculated based on the formula $V2 = 2M / (N_e + N_i)$, where M is the number of papers in the classification of which there is an agreement; N_e is the total number of papers classified by the researcher by category and subcategory; N_i is the total number of papers classified by the coder. The overall score of agreement between the two was 0.92, a quite satisfactory score (Stemler, 2001).

The category-based induction based on which the analysis was done is the following:

Category-based induction

1. Political leadership - Ministry of Education
2. The role of the school psychologist
 - 2.1. Psychologist and integration policy
 - 2.2. Psychologist and traditional school
3. Cooperation and school culture
 - 3.1. Traditional school culture

- 3.2. Integration school culture
- 3.3. What is the role of the parents?
4. Meaning of dominant educational policy: Improvement and changes

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Political leadership - Ministry of Education

All the principals interviewed state that they are unaware and confused about the dominant models of school psychological support. They estimate that the Ministry does not have a clear educational policy and is constantly changing its philosophy and orientation taking into account mainly the financial figures and the political cost, while margins the principals have for self-action are small.

"Nothing is clear; we have no official information and nobody to turn to. The path we are following is unclear" (Kostis).

The gap between planning and practical application is commonplace for most countries, regardless of the support model chosen. The main reason for this gap is the costs of education which leave no room to implement new and innovative programmes. These costs in a knowledge-centred approach and labour market-focused schooling system make it difficult to promote policies that focus on the social dimension of inclusion. In general schools, apart from the necessary logistical infrastructure and integrated staffing with trained teachers, it is necessary to promote equality and authentic relationships between students. This will result in them contributing to the integration of all students inside and outside the school environment (Nakken & Pijl, 2002).

2. The role of the school psychologist

2.1 Psychologist and integration policy

The majority of principals believe that the promotion of psychological support policies in schools requires (a) the application of the social model; (b) the presence of a psychologist and social scientists within the school in order to organise social inclusion programs; (c) the cooperation of all involved; (d) the connection of the school with the family and the greater society; as well as (d) activities outside the school context as well.

"An EDEAY operates well when the psychologist is aware of the school everyday life, rather than being locked in an office and looking for cases to examine. Here, we do not deal with cases but with students. Working with them... helping parents and colleagues" (Antonia).

These views are linked to the majority of the literature. A school psychologist being present plays an important role in introducing all those involved in the inclusive education processes and in tackling problems within the classroom. Inclusion policies are linked to the constant and integral presence of the psychologist in educational processes. In order to avoid divisions and students getting stigmatised, schools must be reinforced with scientific staff and responsibilities that will allow them to solve the resulting problems internally, without constantly resorting to external services or structures. In other words, the school unit needs to be independent enough to be able to amend and redefine without requiring the intervention of third parties and external bodies, which usually ignore the philosophy and principles governing this school (Forlin, 2010).

2.2 Psychologist and traditional school

However, there are also objections regarding the role of the psychologists in school processes. Many principals believe that many psychologists do not follow the social model, but the medical one, which can turn them into an obstacle while developing the integration culture within the school context. Criticism against psychologists is focused on them being reluctant to apply innovative techniques and on adopting bureaucratic logic.

"Of course, some psychologists have no idea what we do at school ... they only want to see students individually and are not willing to work with colleagues ... and us without knowing what they are doing with the children" (Thanasis).

These findings are supported by scientific monographs. The dominant educational policy, the traditional school structures and the existing work framework reserve a specific role and actions for the psychologist and for the scientific staff working in education, in general. In the literature review, the dominant relationship between the school psychologist with students is a dependency relationship where, at the first level, the psychologist is called to identify and meet the student's needs. Consequently, the medical model is applied in school everyday life as the means for specialists to "take care" of the student. The aforementioned approach leads weak students to become passive recipients of a wide range of professional and other kinds of interventions. But, as much as passivity is considered a result and creation of their weakness, in practice it is more in the interest of the careers of those who provide services because it consolidates and strengthens their role as "specialists" and exclusive managers of the social, emotional and cognitive development of each student (Oliver, 2009).

3. Cooperation and school culture

3.1. Traditional school culture

The majority of school principals say that the most important factor in promoting or not school psychological support processes is the school culture that prevails in each school unit. They distinguish between a traditional and an inclusive school culture.

"What do we do here, at school? If we are a team that helps to solve difficulties in a way that helps our children, this is it... But if everyone cares only for themselves ... the atmosphere of the school is heavy. The usual 'attitude of the employee' does not help" (Nikos).

The traditional school culture due to its knowledge-centred approach does not focus much on the individual needs of the students as on their academic performance. Due to the lack of flexibility on the schools part, which tends to embrace the traditional school approach, there is no space and time to manage the different educational needs, as it focuses on a predefined curriculum that teachers are required to carry out, working on their own (Carrington & Elkins, 2002).

3.2. Integration school culture

Many respondents estimate that in cases where the inclusive culture prevails in a school unit, it facilitates their work and positively "attracts" even the most bad-tempered fellow teachers.

"Yes, when there is solidarity between us and a humane atmosphere, new ideas and programmes take place ... the psychologist will help our children when there is a good atmosphere here..." (Niki).

The research findings point out that the model of an alternative school culture tries to engage students in order to cope with the educational process, at the rate that their special characteristics and inclinations allow. Therefore, students of "average" or "below average" level are given the opportunity to reach their full potential while students with disabilities receive constructive support from teaching staff (McDougall et al., 2004).

3.3. What is the role of the parents?

Participants believe that most students' parents are positive about promoting school psychological support, which facilitates the design and implementation of intervention programmes.

"Parents are an important factor and should be inspired by innovations and these new programmes... Parents strengthen their children emotionally, psychologically..." (Athanasia)

Theoretical and research data reinforce the above position. The positive response of parents towards psychological support processes of students helps to increase their expectations regarding the mental resilience of their children. Thus, parents incentivise their children and take care of them accordingly, so the latter improve and try harder, which increases the effectiveness of intervention programs (Farrell, 2004).

4. Meaning of dominant educational policy: Improvement and changes

The main obstacles to the smooth development of psychological support in schools are according to the estimates of the majority of participants in the research process, related to the contradiction between the Ministry's announcements and the real demands of schools. Principals state that fellow educators are often called upon to act solely on the basis of their personal abilities and ambitions, which does not promote the development of a culture of cooperation. They conclude that more cooperation is needed between the teachers to further develop the support structures.

"But they ask us to help the EDEAY, beyond our role. How? Without resources and plan? With the decency of the teachers, again" (Tasia).

The research findings show that cooperation requires the existence of a common school culture that is accepted and applied in practice by all those involved in school everyday life. It seems that live cooperation is difficult to create and maintain mainly because it contradicts all the pressures and restrictions that workers in education face. The two main parameters that hinder its development are time and the knowledge-centred approach of education. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

4 IMPLICATIONS

According to the results of the research, an attempt is made to evaluate the attitudes and the role of all the principals involved regarding the implementation of the psychological support procedures in schools. Also, the limitations of the present research emerge as well as the prospects for future research in the field under study.

Regarding the philosophy of inclusive education and the operation of new institutions in the school context, the research findings focus on the assessments of principals that

the level of information and training of the vast majority of principals and teachers on the above issues is incomplete and often misdirected. For both themselves and the classroom teachers, the requirements of everyday school life are judged to be detached from the basic principles and applications of inclusive education, which does not help teachers to indulge and further engage with inclusion values. The prevailing belief, regarding the institution of EDEAYs, is that the Ministry constantly assigns new additional responsibilities to the school administration and the staff without the appropriate education, training or preparation. Even in cases where the knowledge of the integration applications for students in the school routine is considered satisfactory, the psycho-educational intervention programs developed are minimal due to difficulties in coordination between those involved. Thus, the evaluation of school psychological support efforts is negative, according to all respondents.

Next, regarding the distinct roles of those involved in the services offered by the EDEAY, the role of psychologists appears to be crucial. In cases where the EDEAY psychologist follows the principles of the medical model, it does not seem to promote the inclusive culture within the school context. The psychologist acts and works more divisively focused on the pathology and problematic behaviours of students. On the other hand, principals are convinced that a school psychologist who, as an integral part of the school, strengthens collective processes shifts the field of intervention for issues of coexistence and acceptance from individual impasses to group management within the school, through the interaction of community members. Members of the school community are not limited just to students and teachers but also include parents, the school psychologist and administration and members of the local community. The attitude of the school administration towards the students' parents is considered important as well. The present study also finds that the traditional approach that parent only receive information from schools or are treated as customers by the free market does not strengthen nor promote psychological support for students in school. On the contrary, if the school unit treats parents as partners with a distinct role and as useful counsellors regarding the development of their children, that would help in the development of psychological support at all school levels.

In addition, the principals' assessments regarding the factors that shape the cooperation between principals and school psychologists are summarised into the following two: a) the dominant educational policy, b) the emergent school culture and the role of the principal. The research results focus on the actions of the Ministry and the envisaged policy strategy as fundamental factors for the organisation and determination of psychological support procedures in schools. The principals believe that in a centralized education system, such as the Greek one, the Ministry of Education decisively determines the accession prospects since it is the only body responsible for the formulation of the wider educational policy. Taking into account the above fact, the respondents estimate that in no case is their role directly related to the formation and formulation of educational policy in our country. On the other hand, the prevailing perception is that there is no clear educational policy due to the way the Ministry is structured and operates. Respondents cannot link the implemented

policy regarding school psychological support in education with any of the dominant educational models.

Then, all participants share the belief that the main factor which determines the effective psychological support of students or not in school units is the dominant school culture. School culture is also considered as an "internal educational policy" for each school context and seems to be defined by two main, opposing to each other, directions. The first, the traditional school culture, is associated with the development of personal motivation for students and teachers, with the cultivation of individualism and personal choices to enhance competition and connection to the labour market. The findings of the research connect the above principles with the prevailing atmosphere in the school that prevents the consolidation of the philosophy of inclusive education and the effective joint education of students. On the contrary, the results of the present research confirm that in schools where the prevailing atmosphere among teachers and the exercise of administration are linked to the principles of companionship, mutual assistance and sharing of responsibilities, dealing with students and their coexistence issues is settled in a way that is comforting and beneficial for all, contributing to the emancipation of the entire student population. Finally, in order to strengthen the institution of EDEAYs, the participants demand greater clarification and better definition of the role of those involved.

When interpreting the results, however, we must take into account the methodological limitations of the present research. First of all, the safer generalisation of the results was not allowed since the sample of the research was small and it consisted of special schools principals in a single educational district. Secondly, it was impossible to compare the views and assessments of principals from other parts of Greece. Having more than one respondent in the pilot phase of the research would allow safer conclusions to be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the interview guide. Thirdly, it was impossible to ask the participants for a follow up after a long period of time and compare the research data in order to investigate whether there were any changes in the results, due to objective reasons (e.g., transfers of principals). As a weakness of the reliability of this research can be considered the fact that the assessments of the principals for the potential role of the educational executives (formerly special education counsellors) in the formulation of the educational policy for the psychological support in schools were not interpreted in-depth. Subsequently, applying the multi-methodological approach would enable us to extract quantitative data and, therefore, safer conclusions.

From the mentioned limitations, but also based on the conclusions that were drawn from this research, prospects for further research activity with particular theoretical and research interest emerge. Primarily, it would be interesting to apply the research to a larger sample of principals as well as to investigate the specific phenomena over a longer period of one school year in order to compare and draw safer conclusions regarding the participants' assessments. It would also be helpful for the students' parents, teachers and special education staff to participate in a new research effort in order to explore the views of those also directly involved that objectively influence and shape the respective school culture. In addition, it seems that it would be important to examine the

possibilities of investigating and comparing the views of ministry officials who have long been responsible for shaping the educational policy in our country.

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