

Integrated education, learning disabilities & emotional disorders; Greek Teachers' Professional Development Needs before new challenges¹

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Abstract

In recent years, the increase of pupils' percentage diagnosed with learning disabilities and/or emotional disorders but still attending Greece's general education schools has posed new challenges for teachers, regarding instruction as well as classroom management in general. At the same time, the intense migratory flows that run through the country, which is a main gateway to Western Europe, as well as the multiculturalism itself of the Greek society, have led to an increase in the number of foreign pupils attending Greek schools. This is yet another phenomenon that presents new challenges for the Greek teacher. This research's purpose was to investigate Greek teachers' professional development (PD) needs relating to those two phenomena, that have arisen to a great extent in the country's educational context. The findings of this research can serve as a springboard for the designing of appropriate PD programs, tailored to the needs of teachers, with a view to improving their self-esteem, their job satisfaction, and ultimately pupils' learning outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a sample of 32 primary and secondary education teachers working in the prefecture of Achaia. The sample was selected through a stratified two stage cluster sampling. The interviews were completed in late 2018. The research demonstrated a strong need, or at least desire, from most teachers, for training in these two fields, namely the integrated education and supporting pupils with learning disabilities and/or emotional disorders. The intensity of this need depends on the teacher's years of service as well as on the characteristics of the school unit to which teachers serve. A key finding is the emerging need for the cultivation of a collaborative culture among teachers.

Keywords

Integrated Education, Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disorders, Professional Development

¹ If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Koulis, A. & Bagakis, G. (2020). Integrated education, learning disabilities & emotional disorders; Greek Teachers' Professional Development Needs before new challenges. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 110 - 125). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

Introduction

The term *inclusion* refers to a model where special needs students spend most or all their time in general education classrooms. This model is built on the notion that it is more effective for students with SEN (i.e., Special Educational Needs), to socialize in general education's environment, as it seems to have a positive impact in their social interactions leading ultimately to further success in life. In addition, inclusion benefits all the other students too, since through living and collaborating with SEN students a deeper understanding and respect can be cultivated towards diversity. If the educational system can promote and support this way of thinking through relative policies, this will be of great benefit for everybody's wellbeing in the future society. Inclusion refers to CALD students (i.e., Culturally And Linguistically Diverse) as well. In this level it seems to have particularly beneficial effects for everyone, due to the same reasons as before, let alone CALD students, facilitating amongst others a smoother integration process.

The Salamanca Statement in 1994, poses inclusion as a principal goal for educational systems worldwide. Amongst others, appropriate professional training, both in-service and pre-service, as well as adequate resources are crucial determinants of the successful implementation of an inclusive policy. These characteristics play a vital role in strengthening teachers' competences that are necessary for this procedure (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006; Matović & Spasenović, 2015).

Theoretical Approach

Special Educational Needs Students

Training has been found to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and inclusion (Campbell, Gilmore and Cuskelly, 2003; de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert 2011; Leatherman 2007; Sharma, Forlin & Loreman 2008), enhance self-efficacy and confidence in teaching in inclusive education (Anderson, Klassen & Georgiou, 2007; Jung, 2007; Pijl, 2010; Richards, 2010) and ease teachers' concerns about their knowledge and the stress levels associated with dealing with students with SEN (Chong, Forlin & Au, 2007). On the other hand, a lack of appropriate professional training (Chhabra, Strivasta & Strivasta 2010; Sharma et al., 2013) is associated with teachers' unwillingness to implement inclusive policies.

Many universities' teacher preparation programs in elementary education are allocating minimal coursework to issues related to disabilities and thus do not adequately prepare their graduates to meet the various challenges of today's inclusive schools (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti & Hudson, 2013; Matović & Spasenović, 2015). The situation is far worse in the case of secondary education's teachers. There are only a few countries that make an exception, such as Finland, where special emphasis is given on future teachers' acquisition of a variety of teaching practices and strategies aimed specifically at students who have difficulties in

learning (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Thus, most in-service teachers often feel unprepared and are unable to accommodate SEN students in the classroom (Minke et al., 1996; Mosia, 2014), a situation that might possibly result to a high risk of burn-out as well as high attrition rates.

Most of the teachers express their readiness and need to develop professionally in the fields related to inclusion, particularly addressing topics such as individualization in the teaching process, the developmental characteristics of children with disabilities and individual education plans.

It is evident though that the in-service training currently available cannot adequately prepare them for dealing with SEN students, and thus makes the successful implementation of inclusive-education policies very difficult (Sin, 2004; Sin et al., 2010). Even those who consider their training as beneficial, still express their desire to participate in additional PD activities related to the aforementioned fields. This inadequate training might be a reason why teachers experience burn-out and frustration related to their job. 30% of them are likely to leave the profession within their first three years (Plash & Piotrowski, 2006).

Generally, despite the emerging findings in the field of Special Education, that include new and more effective teaching practices and strategies, due to its rapid progress, there seems to be a lack of studies referring to teachers' specific training needs.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

Apart from dealing with SEN students, teachers' initial preparation related to CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) student needs seems to be quite inadequate as well. While in some cases there seems to be some training, nevertheless it remains theoretical without any practical implications (Morrier et al., 2007; Premier & Miller, 2010).

Despite there is a growing number of relevant in-service programmes that seem to be beneficial, teachers always detect a gap between theory and its implementation in the classroom. As they mention "training comes in the actual teaching/classroom experiences" (Kolano, Dávila, Lachance, Coffey, 2014).

This unsatisfying training, both in-service and pre-service, along with the growing migration flows, given that the educational and emotional needs of students from war-torn countries vary greatly from those of other CALD students (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2005, 2006), a field that is very unlikely to have been covered during any professional training, trigger the expression of intense training needs related to Multicultural Education.

Situation in Greece

In the Greek context, both teachers' initial preparation and in-service training seem to be inadequate when it comes to SEN students, although an increase in the number of available programmes is observed during the last few years. The situation is even worse in Multicultural Education (Damanakis, 2004; Deli, 2018; Nikolaou, 2000, 2003; Papanou, 2004; Vakaliou, 2005; Vamvakidou et al., 2003).

The abrupt increase in the number of CALD students and students with SEN, because of the growing migration flows and the enhancement of diagnose mechanisms as well as the new findings in special education respectively, results in the expression of teachers' intense training needs in those fields (Chatzianni et al., 2008; Katsarou & Dedouli, 2008; Nasenas, 2010; Panteliadou, 2000; Papanou, 2004; Pedagogiko Institutouto, 2010; Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2017; Valmas & Vergidis, 2011; Vitsilaki-Soroniati et al., 2007).

During the last two school years, an unprecedented number of substitutes have been recruited by the state in the Primary Education to provide personalized guidance to students diagnosed with learning disabilities, and/or emotional disorders, inside the classrooms of general education. For the needs of "parallel support" («παράλληλη στήριξη» in Greek), as this personalized guidance received during the lesson is called, graduates from the one and only Department of Special Education in Greece were usually recruited in the past. The enormous emerging needs though led to the recruitment of graduates from the several Departments of Primary Education as well, who had obtained a postgraduate degree in the particular field or had attended a relevant seminar with a duration of several months. Teachers without any formal qualifications regarding Special Education were also recruited. This issue raises some concern regarding the readiness of these teachers to effectively guide their assigned students. Even those postgraduate studies as well as the several seminars, did not offer, in most cases, the practical training that is crucial in the process of building the skills that are necessary for instructing SEN students. As for the Secondary Education, where many substitutes have also been recruited for the same purpose as before, there is no Department to offer specialized training in a specific scientific field regarding Special Education· the substitutes in this case usually have either acquired a post-graduate degree in Special Education or have attended one of the aforementioned seminars.

From all the above it is obvious that there is a need for a systematic in-service training regarding the field of Special Education. This training seems to be of crucial importance in this context in order to ensure a higher quality of instruction for SEN students.

One of the main findings of most of the relevant research in the Greek context remains the lack of exploring teachers' training needs, as the first step before designing training programs (Vergidis et al., 2010). The vast majority of the programs were designed in a centralized and technocratic spirit (Ifanti & Vozaitis, 2011). Particularly their specific needs related to inclusion have almost never been explored. There is a need for mapping these needs as well as for investigating

teachers' training outcomes' expectations. The examination of these aspects could lead to an appropriate planning that would meet teachers' needs and prepare them adequately to dealing with matters of inclusion.

Research Questions

After the study of the relevant literature, several questions arise regarding teachers' training needs related to the aforementioned, with the following two encapsulating most of the concerns of this study and thus making up its research questions:

What do Greek teachers seek and what do they expect from their in-service training related to SEN students?

What do they seek and what do they expect from their in-service training related to Multicultural Education?

Answering the above can make a decisive contribution to satisfying the aforementioned need for a better design of training programs that would respond to the needs and, as far as possible, the expectations of educators regarding issues of inclusion.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews, which are characterized by a fairly open framework that creates the conditions for a focused but also intimate and two-way communication, were conducted for the needs of the present study. When conducting the interviews, the researcher had as his guide a protocol, that took its final form after conducting two pilot interviews.

The sampling technique used was a combination of a stratified two stage cluster sampling and a critical case sampling. The sample consisted of 32 primary and secondary education teachers from the Prefecture of Achaia. The analysis of the data obtained from the interviews was conducted using the method of content analysis. This method contributes to a massive volume reduction of the data to be analyzed, through identification and grouping of meaningful categories. The latter offer the researcher the opportunity to seek the latent understanding of the data in order to extract valid and reliable conclusions, always staying true to the data.

Data Analysis

Below, specific parts of several teachers' interviews are quoted, which are of particular interest regarding, among others, the aforementioned research questions. The brief annotation that precedes each of them is indicative of the

codes, subcategories and categories into which these particular segments of data were subsequently incorporated.

Dealing and Collaborating with SEN students' parents:

Researcher: Would training related to SEN students help you to collaborate more effectively with your students and maybe with your colleagues too?

Teacher: This piece of knowledge always helps you, makes you better and shows you ways to approach your colleagues as well as your students' parents... It's very difficult to deal with adults, who have some of their views crystallized, and it's even more difficult to change or alter those views, regarding their children's difficulties, or persuade them in a manner that wouldn't offend them of the effectiveness of alternative teaching strategies, alternative points of view to their children's' learning... Flexibility is needed in general and such training, for example in the field of psychology, can help you develop this ability...

Inadequacy of in-service training related to SEN students-Need for PD activities conducted by specialists and teachers with experience and knowledge regarding the field:

... yes, especially in this field teachers must be much more supported by specialists in dealing with students with learning disabilities and emotional disorders. And that's because we were not instructed in our initial preparation to this direction... that aspect was missing from this pre-service training as well as from the in-service training conducted by the school advisors. An appropriate training program related to those issues would help me develop as a scientist as well as a professional, as long as it would be conducted by the appropriate specialists i.e. educationalists and psychologists amongst others. Moreover, I believe that qualified and experienced teachers could also be of great help to their colleagues, by providing them their advice and their experiences in the fields of their expertise though seminars or educational meetings...

Abrupt increase in the number of CALD students- Strong need for in-service training:

... I believe that the most difficult task for a teacher is dealing with a multicultural classroom... teachers who instruct students from many countries and different cultures face difficult challenges in their work... I believe that this is the aspect where teachers need to be supported the most. That's because the Greek teacher, who faces this crucial issue heavily in recent years, has no in-service training related to appropriate teaching strategies and methods. There must be support through training in dealing with students for other countries and cultures and especially with students from worn-torn countries...

Contribution of such PD activities, regarding both CALD and SEN students, to teachers' overall personal development:

...surely such a training program would complete me as a teacher and a scientist...

...all these activities help teacher develop emotionally...

Contribution of PD activities regarding both SEN and CALD students to teachers' collaboration-Consolidation of a better school climate-More efficient instruction:

... an appropriate training program would help a lot in the collaboration with my colleagues and sometimes it is of crucial help especially to those who have not be trained though such activities and thus do not have any knowledge about this field. These teachers, through discussion with those that are more trained, over these specific subjects, could also deal more effectively with such students. Certainly, when the school acquires this piece of knowledge over these subjects from trained teachers and when the collaboration spreads this knowledge to the other teachers too, students with such characteristics could be much more supported in the learning process...

Approach to retirement as an inhibitory participation factor to PD activities regarding CALD students:

Researcher: Do you feel that you need to be trained over dealing with a multicultural classroom?

Teacher: If I was 35 years old, I would definitely feel that need because sooner or later the immigrants hopefully will enter massively to our educational system. Then appropriate in-service training would be more than necessary...But in personal level, I will have already retired...

The detailed annotation of each interview's each such semantic passage formulated the respective categories and subcategories through which the exploration of the latent meanings of the data was made possible. This whole process led to the following conclusions.

Conclusions

Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs

The vast majority of teachers seem to express their intense need for training in the field of students' learning disabilities and emotional disorders. This need is attributed on one hand to the intense emerging need for effective dealing with SEN students, whose number in the Greek general education schools has increased rapidly in recent years. On the other hand, it derives from teachers' personal desire, even if there has not yet emerged such a need in their everyday practice, to be up-to-date regarding the appropriate teaching practices and strategies, so that if they ever face such a situation, to contribute as effective as possible to SEN students learning and well-being.

The lack of expertise regarding those fields is highlighted as a factor that causes teachers' great levels of stress and insecurity when having to deal with SEN students. This inadequacy can also lead to completely wrong teaching practices, resulting in students' negative emotions. Teachers illustrate their difficulties,

when called upon to instruct SEN students in everyday practice, as particularly severe and often insurmountable.

These feelings have their roots in the fact that most teachers have virtually no knowledge of dealing with such students, having no contact with this specific field neither in their initial preparation nor in their in-service training. This situation comes in contrast with teachers' initial preparation programmes of countries like Finland, where the best possible equipment for future teachers is sought, *inter alia*, in the specific field of educational practice.

Teachers' strong need for training in this field is accompanied by their high expectations regarding such activities' potential outcomes. Their vast majority expect such programmes to have an extremely important contribution to their cooperation with their students, to the overall classroom management as well as to their overall personal development. According to them, their possible participation in such training cultivates them as scientists, as professionals, but also as personalities in general, because of their content itself, which refers exactly to students who have such special educational needs. Teachers' participation in PD programmes related to this field enhances their confidence as well as their sense of preparedness in view of any relevant difficulty they may be called upon to handle in everyday school practice. These feelings lead to lower levels of work-related stress and burnout, but also to higher levels of self-esteem personal achievement, and ultimately job satisfaction, as teachers sense that they can help their students' progress and overcome any difficulties they face and thus contribute decisively to their lives and careers.

Training can also contribute to fostering collaboration among colleagues in the school context, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a better school climate, which in turn leads, among others, to increased levels of job satisfaction. It is indeed demonstrated that such programmes, with the valid and reliable knowledge they provide, can stimulate meaningful discussions among teachers and exchange of ideas, based on a robust scientific background.

Thus, it seems to be necessary to diffuse PD to the school unit, something that could result in a more effective cooperation between teachers, which in turn benefits both themselves and the students as well as the school unit as a whole. Teachers already trained in these subjects can function as multipliers and catalysts of this diffusion. The latter as well as the cooperation itself between teachers is very difficult in practice due to inherent difficulties. It is the leadership of the school unit that can provide solutions at that point, bringing teachers in contact with the field at first, and promoting then a meaningful collaboration on such issues for the benefit of students. After all, the leadership's role is crucial in shaping the school climate which in turn influences decisively, among others, the frequency and quality of teacher collaboration.

Many teachers also focus on the learning procedure, noting the significant potential contribution of such PD activities, to a higher quality of instruction and

of learning outcomes. The collaboration between teachers and parents of students with learning disabilities is another area where teachers experience severe difficulties and thus expect the contribution of appropriate training programmes to be significant. This cooperation is of utmost importance for effectively guiding those children in the learning process. Improving teachers-parents cooperation creates the conditions for more effective management of the various demanding classroom situations.

In the case of special education teachers, PD activities regarding issues of learning disabilities and emotional disorders are more than essential since those fields make up their scientific subject itself. These teachers point out the important contribution of such activities to their work, as they enable them to look into their field, monitoring the rapid development and the emerging findings of Special Education. This updating of their knowledge gives them the opportunity to collaborate meaningfully with specialists who diagnose and assess students' relevant problems as well as with their colleagues of general education. Through this enhanced cooperation children who face such difficulties as well as their families can be more effectively supported. Such a large-scale collaboration, both with colleagues and with specialists, is necessary to provide the best possible personalized assistance to SEN students. Through such an assistance the crucial ethical role of teachers can be reinforced throughout the range of their guidance to those children who face such difficulties in their everyday life.

The presence of these specialized scientists as well as of the special education teachers themselves in the classroom seems to be of great importance. Specialists on one hand are expected to guide both special and general education teachers in the instruction of students with special difficulties, in order to ensure the best possible personalized assistance described above. Special education teachers on the other hand, with their specialized pedagogical training, can also advise more directly their general education colleagues but also provide targeted, meaningful and systematic support to pupils who face such difficulties in their separate classrooms.

Therefore, training on those issues is more than crucial for both general and special education teachers, in order to ensure this effective communication and collaboration between them, which in turn could contribute to a constantly improving support, guidance and instruction offered to SEN students.

Teachers seek experiential PD activities regarding students' learning disabilities and emotional disorders which would provide them with immediate and practical knowledge on the subject. It seems that the institutionalization of mentoring, which is characterized by the transfer of experience and practical knowledge from the more to the less experienced teachers, in the Greek context could effectively satisfy those teachers' needs, which seem to focus precisely on SEN students' instruction and guidance strategies in everyday school practice. Teachers highlight the inadequacy of school counselors to support them in these issues through incomplete, theoretically driven in-service training programmes.

Furthermore, it was found that these inadequate and roughly designed in-service programmes constitute a factor that has a negative effect both on teachers' job satisfaction and on their levels of burnout. Without appropriate support, educators feel insecure when dealing with SEN students; they are not able, without the expertise needed, to efficiently help them achieve their goals, something that affects negatively their feelings of personal achievement. Negative training experiences can also, in some cases, decisively influence the willingness and motivation of teachers to engage in any training activity. This phenomenon could be called "epimorphosis trauma".

Due to the inadequacy of the aforementioned in-service PD programmes, training is sought by specialist scientists or teachers with experience and knowledge of the subject who will be able to offer good practices and strategies that will help teachers support their students in their daily practice both in and out of the classroom. There are very few teachers who do feel the need for further training in this field. This often seems to be attributed to their conviction that there is no need for specialized knowledge in order to instruct efficiently SEN students. According to them, their good will as well as their accumulative experience from school practice are sufficient for this purpose. This approach is *prima facie* incorrect as, as it has already been pointed out by teachers, who have been called upon to deal with SEN students, without the necessary tools and specialized knowledge, teaching strategies and practices, and without strong scientific guidance from specialists and special education teachers, the results of managing those demanding situations might be quite different from what teacher expects. What must be sought here is to persuade even these few educators that they cannot manage effectively, based on their own experience, cases of students with special educational needs and thus cases where their overall experience of general education cannot help them virtually.

Appropriate informative actions and thoroughly designed in-service training can achieve this goal. There are, of course, some educators who point out their approach to retirement as a decisive factor for nonparticipating in such activities. Even the latter though, recognize the enduring benefits that every teacher has through his contact with new findings, especially in the field of learning difficulties where there is always room for improvement and development.

Supporting Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

The vast majority of teachers seem to express either their strong need or their great desire to participate in PD programmes related to managing a multicultural classroom. This strong need emerges from the dramatic increase in the percentage of foreign students attending Greek schools in recent years, an increase that is due to, among others, the strong migration flows that run through our country. The inadequate in-service training and state's overall zero support to

teachers regarding the field of multiculturalism in education, in this context, also seem to contribute to the intense emergence of the aforementioned need.

The desire and the need to participate in PD activities related to this field usually coexist in the majority of teachers. However, there are also cases where the need for further training in the subject has not arisen yet due to the low presence of the multicultural element in certain schools. Even then, although such training is not considered that necessary in everyday school practice, relevant programs are always sought for because of their perceived importance as well as the potential contribution that teachers expect them to have throughout the range of their teaching practices.

Cultivating such effective practices is crucial as, given the aforementioned rapid increase in the number of foreign students attending Greek schools, it is highly likely that even teachers who have not yet been called upon to manage a highly multicultural classroom, will do so in the near future. In any case, there is a great deal of scientific interest in PD activities related to the management of multiculturalism in the school classrooms.

Teachers' strong need and desire for training in this field is accompanied by their high expectations of the potential outcomes of their participation in such activities. They emphasize the important potential contribution of such training particularly to their cooperation with their students (let alone those who come from different cultural backgrounds) to the improvement of classroom's climate, to a better overall classroom management, to the enhancement of the learning process and its outcomes as well as to their overall personal development. These activities can cultivate them as scientists, as professionals, but also as personalities in general, because of their content itself, which is precisely about interculturality.

These practices and strategies that teachers can be equipped with by such PD activities, which as underlined before can help them to better manage the classroom and any problems related to its intercultural character, contribute greatly to an increased sense of personal achievement and therefore to a significant improvement of teachers' job satisfaction levels.

Teachers' culture and personality play an important role in the management of a multicultural classroom. These characteristics can significantly influence the effect of such activities in their everyday practice, but also can be shaped and nurtured through well-structured PD programs regarding this specific field.

Such programmes can also contribute to fostering collaboration among colleagues in the school context, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a better school climate, which in turn leads, among others, to increased levels of job satisfaction. It is indeed demonstrated that these programmes, with the valid and reliable knowledge they provide, can stimulate meaningful discussions among teachers and exchange of ideas, based on a robust scientific background.

Thus, it seems to be necessary to diffuse PD to the school unit, something that could result in a more effective cooperation between teachers, which in turn benefits both themselves and the students as well as the school unit as a whole. Teachers already trained in these subjects can function as multipliers and catalysts of this diffusion. The latter though as well as the cooperation itself between teachers is very difficult in practice due to inherent difficulties.

Collaboration between teachers and foreign students' parents is another area where the former experience severe difficulties and thus expect the contribution of appropriate training programmes to be significant. This cooperation is of utmost importance for effectively guiding those children in the learning process. Improving teachers-parents cooperation creates the conditions for more effective management of the various demanding classroom situations.

Teachers seek experiential PD activities, which could provide them with immediate and practical knowledge on the subject, something that was also observed above when describing teachers' training needs regarding students' learning difficulties and emotional disorders.

There are very few teachers who do not feel either the strong need or the intense desire to be trained in this field. This feeling is most often derived from their belief, which in turn is shaped by their personal experiences, that at least in secondary education, where the majority of those teachers come from, children from different cultural backgrounds are already integrated. According to them, since relevant conflicts are not observed, special skills, teaching practices and strategies for more effective instructing and managing the multicultural element are not required.

There are, of course, fewer cases, among those teachers, who do not feel that strong need or desire to participate in such activities, who either seem to be uninterested in their content itself or point out their approach to retirement as a decisive factor for nonparticipating in such PD programmes.

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