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Teachers' Attitudes Regarding the Development of Socio-Emotional Skills in Elementary Schools in Greece

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' attitudes regarding the development of socio-emotional skills of students in primary general schools and the implementation of programs concerning the development of these skills within the school context. Socio-emotional skills are of particular importance in children's lives, as they help to develop appropriate codes of behavior, which would allow them to survive in the contemporary demands of society. Students should be able to communicate in acceptable ways, both with their peers and with other members of their family and society. An important contributor to the development of socio-emotional skills is the teacher (Elias & Arnold, 2006). The contemporary teacher must be thoroughly informed about techniques and approaches that should be followed to develop and strengthen the cultivation of these skills to all students and particularly to those who experience difficulties of social adaptation and show disruptive behavioral disorders.

Keywords:

socio- emotional skills, teachers' attitudes, behavioral disorders

1.Introduction

The term *socio-emotional skills* means skills that support and develop the bilateral process, through which the children are introduced to the wider community, while at the same time they differentiate as separate people, with the coexistence of personality, of feeling and their organization and control by mental mechanisms (Cole & Cole, 2001).

Basic socio-emotional skills, which pupils need to develop in the school environment-with the help of teachers-are empathy, understanding and management of basic emotions (joy, sadness, anger, fear) and especially of those which are extremely negative. The cultivation of techniques for handling situations that are created through conflicts is considered particularly important. By developing skills and techniques, students are empowered to avoid aggressive and provocative behaviours in resolving problematic situations (Matsopoulos, 2000).

Socio-emotional learning is the field of education that connects the academic knowledge with the abilities and skills that are important for success in school, but also in family, or society, working life and, more generally, in life (Elias & Arnold, 2006, p. 6). In accordance with the above, the combination of academic and socio-emotional learning is a prerequisite for effective education nowadays.

Caldarella & Merrell (1997) classified social skills during childhood. These are the *relationships with peers* (compliments, helping others, invitation for cooperation, encouragement for dialogue, leadership etc), *self-management* (self-regulation, rule sequence, compromise on cases that need, acceptance of criticism, collaboration in many cases etc.), *academic course* (organization, completing activities, teacher's instruction sequence, search help in courses when it is needed, etc.), *compliance* (sequence of instructions and rules,

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acceptance of the hand, responsibility in completing assigned work, etc.), *claim* (dialogue or conversation, return to compliments, self-confidence, introduction to others and expression of feelings to injustice, etc.). The degree of conquest and successful implementation of the above mentioned skills determine the extent of social adequacy and individual customization (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997).

According to researchers, negative attitudes, which are heavily dependent on the sex and age of the children are observed within the school environment (Burke, Loeber & Birmaher, 2002; Farrington, 1998; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998) such as, taunting of students among themselves, threats, intimidation, physical abuse, rejection and isolation, reactions to teachers and non-cooperation accompanied by lack of teamwork (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1991).

Often, the absence of development of social-emotional skills of children is the reason for the appearance of negative behaviours that should be dealt with at an early age, so that they are not solidified as permanent characteristics of the child. Negative behaviours are usually accompanied by very low school records, lack of social relationships, emotional difficulties, rejection and isolation from companies and aggressive behaviour against parents and teachers (Loeber et al., 1998; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Wilmhurst, 2009).

Capsi & Moffit (1995) argue that children with aggressive behaviors usually present lack in developing some basic verbal skills. This absence affects negatively the development of self-control; consequently, children have difficulties expressing negative feelings and they exhibit delinquent behavior. Additionally, these children have not developed the skill of empathy, as they are unable to put themselves in the place of others and understand the feelings of other people.

The development of psycho-emotional and social skills of children in the general population is in the foremost position of importance as early as the kindergarten curricula (2003) and the special education consider that these skills play an exceptionally important role in children's progress. One of the key objectives of preschool education as well as the Institution of Integration is the children's socialization and enhancement of self-reliance (Cross Curricular Curriculum Study Framework, 2003). However, in accordance with other researchers, an inclusive programme for young children, who exhibit a variety of problems, is considered successful if sets short-term or long-term social and emotional objectives, other than the teaching goals (Bailey & Wolery, 1992).

In Greece, there have been a few efforts to promote developmental programs regarding socio-emotional skills. According to the few such interventions in schools, research has shown great improvement of social skills of participating students and especially those who were less popular and experienced rejection by their peers (Triliba & Chiementi, 1996).

An indicative program of intervention that was designed and implemented in schools within Cyprus and Greece is the *Program for Promotion of Mental Health and Learning: Social and Emotional Education*. This program was designed by the *Centre for Research and Applications of School Psychology at the University of Athens* and was implemented in collaboration with the *Centre for Educational Research and Evaluation*. That program focused on developing socio-emotional skills for all students. The application was undertaken by both school psychologists and teachers following who were specialized educated (Hatzichristou et al., (a), 2004).

Also, a *Preventative Program of Social-Emotional Learning* was applied to a high school in the island of Crete with the aim to promote psychological resilience and emotional intelligence of children. The survey results showed that such programs are even more effective when supported by the educational community as a whole. Generally, Matsopoulos & Triliba (2004) support that teachers ought to promote schedules and try to prevent problems before they appearing. The research data, however, in relation to programs of socio-emotional skills were presented incomplete and insufficient for carrying out inferences.

Finally, there is a gap in bibliography, as regards the collection of teachers' attitudes concerning the socio-emotional development of students. The completion of this research is important and necessary in order to provide information about the attitudes and the knowledge of teachers regarding the development of socio-emotional skills of their students and the use of programs targeted towards this direction.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample

In this research five primary education teachers were involved. During that particular school year (2015-2016), they taught in an elementary school situated in a semi-urban area in the vicinity of the city of Heraklion, in Crete. The overall number of registered students in the school was one hundred and six (106).

Every one of the aforementioned teachers was solely in charge of one class from 1st to 5th grade. One of them was male, while the rest were women. With regards to their educational background one holds a Masters degree while the remaining four are holders of a bachelor degree from a University Department of Primary Level Education. Three teachers have 10 years of professional experience while the rest have 15 years respectively.

2.2. Process

This work is both a qualitative study and a case study and was carried out by applying the methodological approach of the *educational action research*. The researcher primarily aimed at creating a friendly and cordial atmosphere in his initial meeting with the teachers participated in the survey. On the brink of the meeting the participants discussed general educational issues, and then, the teacher-researcher introduced to the team to the topic of the research, that is *the knowledge they have about the socio-emotional skills of their students and their development techniques*. Finally, the contributors were asked to give their permission to the teacher-researcher to enter occasionally their classrooms to attend different subjects of the curriculum each time, in order to carry out observation and to maintain a *diary of reflection*.

Then, the teacher-researcher started the obvious non-participatory observation of teachers during their teaching, completing the *diary of reflection* in parallel, six times for each teacher, over the period of three weeks. The duration of observation was 45 minutes, one teaching hour.

Upon completion of the above mentioned non-participatory observations with simultaneous data recording into *the diary of reflection*, a *focus group* session was held with the participation of all teachers, in order to complement collectively a *semi-structured* interview.

The interview lasted for 1 hour and 45 minutes. The preliminary discussion focused on both the research topic and the interview process and in particular, it was stressed that the interview aimed at receiving responses from the focus group as a whole and not individually. Consequently, it became clearly clarified that the participants will not respond individually to the questions, but would provide a group response after discussion between them. Shortly after, the recording began and teachers were discussing the questions of the interview under the guidance of teacher-investigator (coordinator). After that, the teacher went through the transcript of the interview, the recording and the analysis of collected data.

2.3. Research tools

According to Vrasidas (2014), in order for a properly structured and well organized qualitative research to be accomplished, there must be adherence to the basic criterion of validity. Also, there should be an application of techniques, which can ensure the validity of research results. The use of multiple techniques to collect data from the interviewer is considered of particular value. So, the researcher could use several data collection methods to ensure the utmost validity (Vrasidas, 2014). Therefore, this research study used three data collection methods such as, apparent *non-participatory observation*, *reflection diary* and *focus group interview*, in order to achieve the triangulation of data, which reinforces the validity of a qualitative research (Kyriazi, 1999).

In the context of the *clear non-participant observation*, the teacher-researcher observed the teaching process and was found in the natural environment of the observed that was the classroom. In this particular instance the researcher observed and recorded events associated with the observed teachers' reactions in unexpected and precluded behaviors of students. In addition, he recorded the ways in which the observed teacher came across the behaviors of students (punishments, rewards, incentive offer, children with low self-esteem and self-confidence, etc.).

All collected data were recorded into the *diary of reflection* and the information that emerged was used to draft the interview questions given to the focus group for further discussion and group's response. Finally, in the context of the *focus group interview* the participant teachers answered the questions of the interviewer as regards the knowledge of socio-emotional skills of their students, discussing in parallel to each other and posing new concerns.

2.4. Data Analysis

After careful transcription of the focus group interview, answer categories were created that were grouped into the following themes.

3. Results

3.1. Information regarding the proficiency of teachers on the socio-emotional skills of students

Generally, teachers presented the socio-emotional skills they consider most important for the smooth integration of the child in the school context. One of the basic socio-emotional skills which students must develop within the school environment with the help of teachers is *empathy*. According to Matsopoulos (2000), with empathy the person understands how others feel and thereby learns to refrain from conflicts, while at the same time, improves the social relations and resolves the problems more easily. Also, Malikiosi and Loizou (2003), indicate that empathy is an attitude whose characteristics are presented through behavior that demonstrates one against another. Supplementary, researchers consider very important the understanding and management of basic emotions (joy, sadness, anger, fear) and in particular of those that are negative, as well as handling situations that are created through conflicts, something that teachers do not mention.

In addition, researchers report that teachers taking advantage of the experiences of their students can bring them in front of different experiences that will impart knowledge and skills and develop their communication. Through the organization of cooperation activities, they can help students to acquire important skills (conversation, dialogue, acceptance of another's opinion, respect, honesty, etc.) that will enhance their cognitive skills, something that research participants do not present in their replies.

Moreover, the teachers determined the inadequacies of their knowledge regarding the socio-emotional skills that are required to support the social- emotional development of their students and also the techniques to follow in order to achieve this. In the past, Papanou (2003) collected the attitudes and perceptions of teachers in relation to educational activities they desire to participate and found that they wished to be further trained in child's psychology topics.

3.2 The presence of negative behaviors and their relationship with socio-emotional skills

Teachers argued that the absence of socio-emotional adjustment creates negative behaviors. Additionally, teachers reported that due to the lack of socio-emotional skills children show disrespect, phenomena of isolation and rejection of other children, anger, aggressive verbal behavior and selfishness. In agreement with the literature, the disruptive behavioural disorders in the context of the school are presented in the form of aggressive teasing, with rejection of friendships and interpersonal relations, with reactivity against teachers and pupils, aggressive outbursts and using physical and verbal violence (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1991).

It is also worth mentioning that the absence of a representative vocabulary and terminology for the expression of behaviors observed by teachers was noticed, which are deposited and are described with simple everyday speech. Besides, teachers find it difficult to categorize the behaviors and match them with the characteristics of students e.g. sex, age, family circumstances etc. and to identify straightforward approaches to handle such behaviors.

3.3 Techniques used by teachers to develop socio-emotional skills to students. Recognition and management of cases with lack of socio-emotional skills

Most teachers converge to use punishment as a consequence of illicit behaviors of students. There are, however, teachers who do not use punishment but use discussion and reward in cases where needed (positive behaviors). The formation of groups in cases where teachers seek to develop the skill of cooperation to their students is also observed. In addition, teachers agree with the modern concepts that promote techniques as regards rewarding and punishing which focus on alternative ways of punishment with positive outline. So, teachers often are encouraged to develop student's feelings and their general ability to put one's self faced with others without manifesting destructive tendencies (Kourkoutas, 2011).

This demonstrates that teachers in different countries and in different educational systems do not consider themselves qualified to deal with children with socio-emotional difficulties and disruptive behavioural disorders. Numerous studies have shown that students with similar problems have less feedback and support from their teachers compared with those that are considered to fall within the standards of good social conduct (Alvarez, 2004). So, it is noteworthy that the findings of those studies are in agreement with the insights of the participant teachers in this research and their admission that in several cases sufficient feedback is not given.

Another important issue is the presence of the student as a member of a team. The group helps the student to develop communication skills, though it does not specify the positive development of social skills, since children do not always understand the needs and feelings of others (Sakellariou, 2002).

At the same time, due to the fact that social skills are a prerequisite for healthy and balanced school life, teachers bear responsibilities for developing and cultivating healthy relationships among students (Asher, Oden & Gottman, 1992). The educator must offer positive reinforcement, verbally guide and use effective strategies for the development of communication skills of students (Asher et al, 1992).

Moreover, there is a great percentage of children with disorders that have not managed to develop operational frameworks which meet the requirements of social relations that developed in the school environment, which is observed in the responses of the teachers. The integration of these pupils in the group and in the learning process is necessary (McMahon & Forehand, 2003). It seems that teachers try to facilitate various informal ways, which they base on their experience to support their students and resolve the problems that may be are create. Their alternatives are associated with the offer of opportunities to children by creating debates and the development of positive reward behavior patterns. Moreover, teachers recognize that if children are motivated they decrease negative behaviors within the school environment. At this point, it appears a contrast. The literature review suggests that children with anti-social behavior rarely obtain encouragement from teachers, while students who exhibit disruptive behavioural disorders more often receive negative behavior from them (training punishment, lack of support, etc.) (Mcevoy & Welker, 2000).

On the whole, teachers demonstrate their need for further training and their concern about the adequacy of the knowledge they have so far and are in agreement with surveys, where teachers indicate uncertainty and anxiety when they have to deal with students in their classroom with behavioral and emotional problems (Thanos, Kourkoutas & Vitalaki, 2006; Kourkoutas et al., 2011).

3.4. Necessity of developing socio-emotional skills in the school context

Teachers recognized their responsibility for the development of social skills in order to cultivate healthy relationships among their students. They understood that the absence of social skills can lead to isolation and low self-esteem in students agreeing to international bibliography (Asher, Oden & Gottman, 1992).

With proper socialization, students are involved in interpersonal relationships and develop specific, useful special skills like, feeling of acceptance, sympathy and empathy etc. These skills allow a smooth adaptation of students in the classroom team life (Schaffer, 1996) which result in avoiding aggressive and provocative behavior when resolving problematic situations (Matsopoulos, 2000).

4. Conclusions

The participant teachers in this research do not have the aptitude to even name some of the most basic and important social and emotional skills that they should teach to their students. In addition, the lack of such terminology from the teachers' side is proven through their answers and their inability to classify the basic social and emotional skills into categories.

However, teachers seem to know some emotional skills, such as empathy and the management of basic emotions (joy, sadness, fear, anger), at least by name. Additionally, they recognize that self-esteem affects the students positively or negatively and its absence creates conditions of rejection and isolation to them.

It was found that teachers did not have adequate knowledge *to teach and develop* socio-emotional skills to their students. The participants teachers mentioned that they did not have sufficient knowledge with regard to techniques concerning the development of social skills among children. Separately, participant – teachers consider that the development of social skills would help all students to advance their cognitive development, too. They also believe that they should give importance to the socio-emotional development, although they are not informed about this issue.

Additionally, teachers observe, correctly, that many times the lack of socio-emotional skills results to disruptive behavioural disorders. They understand that the aggressive behavior, lack of respect, lack of self-control and lack of limits is likely to come from small socio-emotional adjustment. They, also, observe that phenomena of isolation and rejection may stem from poor social adjustment; they find it difficult, however, to define how they will integrate the students facing these problems more easily within the school context. Although the courses give opportunities to students for collaboration and interaction, teachers are not able to express how they do this. So they need more specific training upon the development of social- emotional skills. Moreover, teachers agree that the development of socio-emotional skills is not a topic they have been taught in the university as much as necessary.

All the above mentioned correspond with the observations recorded into the *diary of reflection*, where teachers showed concern and anxiety regarding the insufficiency of their knowledge about creating and developing socio-emotional skills for their students in the classroom. Also, according to the *diary of reflection* it was observed that teachers were working intimately with their students by using the dialogue as well as rewarding them. But they found it difficult to use other techniques in developing socio-emotional skills, such as managing emotions, for example.

Teachers agree, however, that the teaching and the development of socio-emotional skills must be a philosophy, not just applied to their classroom condition, but to the entire school and to the educational system of the country as a general rule.

Unfortunately, the model of teaching and development of socio-emotional skills to pupils is not clearly and explicitly provided by the *analytical educational curriculum* for the Greek elementary school.

Therefore, it would be extremely useful in the future to integrate in the aforementioned curriculum courses that can offer insights as regards the techniques referred to the development and teaching of socio-emotional skills to the students.

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