



School-Focused Training as a Means to Improve the Quality of Education: the School Principal's Role

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to indicate the school principal's role and contribution to the initiation, organization and implementation of school-focused training programs in the microcosm of the school context, according to its special social, racial and cultural features. The starting-point of the research is the innovative, flexible and decentralized practice of school-focused training, which can meet the specialized training needs of a school unit, as well as the complex key role that the school principal plays. The ultimate aim of this paper is to elevate the school-focused training to a means that can decisively contribute to the quality improvement of the school unit work. Consequently, a theoretical approach of the topic is attempted by referring to the institution of the primary and secondary school teachers' training in Greece. Also, a clarification of school-focused training, using the Greek and foreign pedagogical bibliography, is attempted, followed by the citation of the characteristic features of the qualifications, skills and abilities that the school principal should have in order to proceed to the implementation of the school-focused training. In the second part of the paper, empirical evidence is being presented. Having as a sample 15 primary and secondary school principals of Thessaloniki Prefecture, I conducted interviews for the data collection and used the qualitative content analysis, in order to examine whether and to what extent the primary and secondary school principal contributes to the planning, organization, realization and continuation of the school-focused training programs. One of the most important findings of the research is the fact that primary school principals organize school-focused training programs with higher frequency than secondary school principals and that these programs relate to new technologies, teaching methodology, education legislation and administration.

1. Introduction

The present paper tackles the school-focused training, an issue both crucial and beneficial to the elevation of the educational mission, but at the same time a neglected field within the framework of the Greek pedagogical research. The aim of the paper is to examine, theoretically and empirically, the role of the school principal of primary and secondary education in the planning, organization and implementation of school-focused training programs within the framework of the Greek educational system. The paper consists of two parts. In the first part, the theoretical, the terminological clarification of the school-focused training through the mainly foreign pedagogical bibliography is attempted, as well as a brief description of the profile that the school principal of the contemporary school should have, in order to implement this innovative form of training in the microcosm of the school unit. In the second part of the paper, the most important findings of the research which was conducted during the beginning of 2010 in fifteen primary and secondary school principals of Thessaloniki Prefecture are briefly presented.

2. Theoretical Part

2.1 The teachers' training: definition and typology

The teachers' training of every school level is internationally characterized as a notion inherent in the teachers' profession and directly connected with the teacher's personal and professional development. No matter how difficult the precise definition of the training is, scientists and researchers who have as their research object the institution of the teachers' training, agree on some fundamental aspects of it.

Firstly, they relate it with alterations made in social, political, economic, technological, cultural and environmental level, with the initial teachers' training, and with the insufficient training either into the field of the teachers' subject or into the field of pedagogy and teaching methodology [5], [13], with the personal and professional teacher's development and, lastly, with the non-static nature of the teacher's profession [4]. Considering the above-mentioned aspects of teachers' training, it is easy to understand that training constitutes a complex entity with various dimensions and it should take form depending on the priority that is established by the organizers or designers of the training program [7]. The most important criteria which lead to different types of training are related to the philosophical background on which the planning of the training program is based, the introduction of innovations in the field of teaching, the duration of the training program, the recipients of the training procedure, the institutionalized organization that undertakes the training initiative and the venue for the training program [6]. Having as starting point the criterion of the venue for the teachers' training program, the following types of training ensue: school-focused training, distance training and training that takes place outside the school context.

2.2 School-focused training: function and advantages

The term "school-focused training" entails the teachers' training of both school levels that takes place inside the context of the school unit. From the review of the relevant bibliography, a twofold distinction of the school-focused training occurs: the first one uses the school unit as a basis ("school-based training") and the second one uses the school unit as a focal point ("school-focused training") [2], [9], [10], [15]. The term "school-based training" signifies the model of the in-service training that was adopted during the decades of 1970 and 1980 mainly in American and British schools. The training activities of the school-based training take place exclusively within the school units and aim for the better control of it. The school unit, functioning as a community, outlines its needs, finds the necessary funds and implements its training activities within its space and with the exclusive participation of its teachers [10]. In this model of school-based training, every school unit is transformed into a learning community which traces, records and tackles problems and deficiencies of its personnel using its own professional way. The contents of the training are more personalized to the specialized needs of every teacher, which relate to the teacher's character and their basic studies [2]. Having previously taken into consideration how to meet every individual teacher's needs the training activities are planned. It could be said that the main aim of the school-based training is the improvement of every member of the school; a secondary aim is the improvement of the performance of the whole school. This specific model of school-based training, focusing on the teachers' individual needs, neglects the needs of the school and does not take into consideration the demands of society, which are continuously and variously transformed [11]. Because of the restrictions of the school-based training and the criticism that it had attracted, another model of training, the "school-focused training", was developed [1]. Perry provides this definition: "school-focused training includes all those strategies that are adopted by trainers and teachers in a spirit of cooperation so that the training programs meet the recognized needs of the school and the level of teaching and learning inside the school class improve" [9: 12]. This specific training model is identical with what is considered to be school-focused training in Greece.

The basic differences between the two approaches of in-service training are two. The first is that the school-focused training actively utilizes internal and external training factors, combining institutions such as the university and the school advisors and the second is that it tries to meet the specialized training needs of the school unit as a whole, according to its special features, by not focusing only on the teacher's individual needs [8].

2.3 The role of the school principal in the school-focused training

The school principal is one of the most crucial factors in the organization and implementation of a school-focused training program. Playing a vital role as a principal-leader and manager, the school principal is able to encourage the personal and professional development of the teachers of the school unit, to keep the interpersonal relationships among teachers in a balanced state and, in general, to be interested in the further improvement of the level of the provided education. According to the present legislative framework that governs the Greek educational system, the school principal "makes sure that the school is a basic unit of the teachers' training regarding administrative, pedagogical and scientific topics". The same participative and open school administration style applies to the most known leadership theories, such as the collegial model [3], even though in the Greek educational context the highly bureaucratic nature of the educational system and the absence of school-focused training programs become evident from studies and scientific researches. Meeting the training needs of the teachers of every school level via the school-focused training is internationally part of the



everyday practice of the school units because of the flexibility and the directness that this type of training offers.

3. Empirical Part

Having as starting point the role that the school principal can play in the realization of school-focused training programs and the positive outcome that results from the implementation of this decentralized type of training, which is based on the recognized training needs of the teachers of the school unit, I undertook to investigate the role and the contribution of the school principal of primary and secondary education to the school-focused training. For a most effective research, the technique of semi-structured interview was chosen, since it enables the researcher to fully grasp the social attitudes and opinions of the research subjects, deriving in-depth information. The processing of the research data, which were written down from the recorded text, was achieved using the qualitative content analysis [12]. The data collection was carried out in January 2010 having as sample 15 primary and secondary school principals of Thessaloniki Prefecture (5 primary school principals, 5 junior high school principals and 5 senior high school principals).

The following findings resulted from the processing of the research data: A) The great majority of school principals of both school levels, regardless of whether they have implemented a school-focused program or not, attributed major importance to the school-focused training. B) The primary school principals organize and realize school-focused training programs with higher frequency than secondary school principals. C) All the school principals, with the exception of one female primary school principal, would like to organize and implement a school-focused training program. D) Both primary and secondary school principals regard the teachers' presence at school throughout the school day as a basic prerequisite for the implementation of the school-focused training. E) Some of the most prevalent topics regarding the content of the school-focused training programs that appeal to the research subjects are related to School Psychology, education legislation, new technologies and Teaching Methodology. F) The duration of the school-focused training programs that the school principals of the research had implemented varied: there were mentioned programs of short duration (a few sessions), of middle duration (up to 6 months), and of longer duration (one school year). The long-term programs appear to be implemented with lower frequency, since such a school-focused training program presupposes a diligent and meticulous planning and careful action coordination, prerequisites that are met with difficulty in the daily school life. G) The chosen trainers of the school-focused training programs are not only scientists from the academic community, but also colleagues with further formal qualifications. H) The main reason that motivates the school principals of the sample to implement a school-focused training program is the lack of pedagogical and teaching methodology training on the teachers' part [14].

4. Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of the research subjects' interviews and the findings that were briefly presented above made evident the acceptance of the school-focused training by the primary and secondary school principals and its elevation to a means that can decisively contribute to the overall quality improvement of the provided education. More specifically, the subjects recognize the teachers' personal and professional development and the improvement of their pedagogical and teaching training as well as the general improvement of the school unit as the main benefits that result from the school-focused training. The research showed that the school principal's complex role and the administration style greatly influence the implementation and the successful conduct of the school-focused training programs and are directly connected with the effectiveness of the school unit and the educational work.

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