

Teachers' perceptions of their readiness to recognize and treat mental health issues of students¹

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Abstract

School environments are constantly changing; thus, affecting students' mental health; therefore, enhancing readiness, knowledge/preparation of teachers for early recognition and treatment of mental health difficulties of children increases. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the self-assessing readiness of Greek primary school teachers to recognize and deal with the mental health issues presented by their pupils. One hundred-and-thirteen (113) Greek primary school teachers participated in the study. The results indicated differing degrees of teachers' perceptions of their knowledge/readiness of recognizing and dealing with children's mental health issues in school. Teachers' responses differed as to their perception of self-readiness in terms of years of experience and level of previous studies or training courses.

Key Words

teachers' perceptions, self-readiness, students' mental health

Introduction

Nowadays economic crisis and migration may negatively affect children's lives, disturbing their mental health (Xatzixristos & Hopf, 1991; Economou et al., 2011; Kentikelenis et al., 2011). Mental Health is a state of emotional, psychological and social well-being, in which everyone realizes his/her own potential, can cope with the normal pressures of life, can work productively and is able to contribute to his/her community (World Health Organization, 2004). Some mental health issues may be anxiety, depression, bullying, abuse (physical, sexual), bereavement, learning and behavioral problems, cultural differences. Mental health problems are related to low school performance (Xatzixristos & Hopf, 1991; Artero et al., 2001; Gigi et al., 2014).

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Although safeguarding pupils' mental health is considered to be a teacher's responsibility (Lapan et al., 2001), the majority of teachers consider themselves to be unable to cope with their pupils' mental health issues (Xatzixristos, 2004). Teachers' perceptions were assessed in several studies on their ability to recognize excessive stress in their students. The results showed that they couldn't distinguish normal anxiety from excessive anxiety and they fail to recognize or deal with anxiety as a mental health issue at school. In addition to it, teachers stated to have received little or no education or training regarding children's mental health (Lapan et al., 2001), and therefore, denounce the absence of school counselors and teachers' training programs from schools, who would help them deal with such problems (Askill-Williams & Lawson, 2013).

Schools must strengthen the emotional and psychological well-being of children, prevent mental illness and provide effective interventions in mental health problems (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). Walter and colleagues (2006) argue that school is the ideal place to provide mental health services because of their great place in child development.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the self-assessing readiness of Greek primary school teachers to recognize and deal with the mental health issues presented by their pupils.

Theoretical Framework

Students' mental health needs

Exposure to violence, poverty and malnutrition can have negative effects on children's well-being (Benjet, 2010; Alonso et al., 2013). School often neglects to take care of its students' mental health (Belfer, 2008; Patel et al., 2008; Kieling et al., 2011). Therefore, mental disturbances, such as anxiety, depression, bullying, abuse (physical, sexual), bevereament, learning and behavioral problems, and cultural differences, are particularly prevalent in childhood (Kessler et al., 2005). Young people affected by mental illness display low school performance (Xatzichristos & Hopf, 1991; Artero et al., 2001; Gigi et al., 2014), low levels of social interaction, face problems with the law and score higher drop-out rates and higher teenage pregnancy rates (Breslau et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2009; Vigod et al., 2014; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003; Collishaw et al., 2004).

Studies indicated that the majority of children under 12 years old develop significant anxiety problems (Headley, 2013). According to Fitzpatrick and Sharry (2006), children are not even able to describe what they feel which form a proper mental health issue. 46% of school-aged children in the United Kingdom claimed to have been threatened and teased by their peers in their school backyard (DCSF, 2010). Peer threatening and teasing at school may

affect children's well-being by increasing the levels of anxiety and depression to them (Meltzer et al., 2011).

Teachers' role in managing mental health concerns

Teachers are considered to be children's second guardians after their parents (Xatzixristos, 2008), since school is the second social context after home in which their behaviors are manifested. The aim of the teacher is twofold: to promote and secure both the education of the youth and his/her mental health (Rothi et al., 2008). Teachers are considered to be the first ones who recognize the mental health problems of their students (e.g., anxiety) and other divergent behaviors in them (Headley, 2013). Although many teachers agree that their role as to pupils' mental health professionals is not consistent with their "teaching work" (Nyutu & Bertel, 2012), modern reality requires teacher to play more than one role in school (Rothi et al., 2008). Teachers need to play multiple roles in school and be students' helpers, educators, counselors of both children and parents, children's behavioral problem detectors and therapists (Reinke et al., 2011). Poor relations between teachers and students may be a predictor of child psychiatric disorders (Lang et al., 2013) and low academic performance (Cadima et al., 2010).

Although the management of mental health concerns appears to be one of teachers' duty, an examination of the teacher training curricula in the major universities in Greece revealed that there are few courses offered which are designed to increase psychological knowledge in teachers. Most of the courses offered are foundation courses in psychology that do not necessarily provide teachers with emotional and behavioral management skills. A few universities do offer a single course in guidance and counseling in managing mental health concerns as part of the teacher education program (Pedagogical Department of Primary Education of University of Patras, 2017).

Teachers' perceptions of their readiness to recognize and deal with mental health issues of their students

Previous studies have assessed teachers' perceptions of their ability to recognize and deal with the mental health problems of their students (Reinke et al., 2011). Headley (2013) investigated teachers' perceptions of their ability to recognize excessive stress in their students. The results of the survey showed that although teachers were able to recognize stress in their students, they were unable to consistently distinguish normal anxiety from excessive anxiety. The majority of them stated that they were unable to deal with the anxiety of their students, considering it a health mental problem. Teachers reported that they received little or no education and training in the mental health issues of their students (Headley, 2013; Reinke et al., 2011). Their lack of

educational training is considered to make them inadequately equipped to recognize and deal effectively with the needs and mental health problems of their students.

Previous research on the perceptions of Greek teachers as to their readiness to recognize and deal with pupils' mental health issues is limited (Panagopoulou, 2014). Only few researches have investigated Greek teachers' perceptions of their readiness in recognizing and supporting students with mental health problems (Panagopoulou, 2014). The majority of teachers have stated to have received little training and education in dealing with mental health problems of their students (Panagopoulou, 2014; Walter et al., 2006; Loades & Mastroiannopoulou, 2010). Teachers feel unable to recognize their pupils' mental health problems (Rothi et al., 2008; Walter et al., 2006).

Research Questions

1. How do teachers feel themselves prepared to effectively manage different mental health issues as teachers in the school environment?
2. Do teachers think that their education has prepared them to effectively manage mental health issues in their class?

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirteen (113) teachers of public primary schools in Greece participated in the survey. Out of these, thirty-eight (38) were men and seventy-five (75) were women. The average age of the teachers were forty-two (42) years and the average years of teaching experience were seventeen (17) years.

Most of the teachers (31,9%) had a university degree from a faculty of Primary Education in the country, while few teachers (22,1%) claimed to have a master's degree. The 57,5% of teachers stated to have attended training programs for teachers. Many of them (76,9%) had received their training by the Regional Training Center of Patras.

Teachers' participation in the survey entailed the completion of a questionnaire over a forty-five minutes (45') period.

Instruments

The participants were asked to complete a demographic information form, which asked them about their sex, years of teaching experience, highest level of education (degree) and place of training.

Each participant completed *The Role of Mental Health in Teacher Education*, a self-report questionnaire designed to assess teachers' perceptions of their readiness to recognize and deal with the mental health issues of students (Nuytu, 2012). The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In the first part, the level of preparation in the area of mental health of teachers was investigated on a five-point Likert scale (1-*This was not part of my training and I was not prepared to deal with this issue at all* to 5-*This was a major part of my training and I was well prepared to deal with this issue*). Sample statements included the following: 'Strategies to handle bullying in the school environment,' 'Recognizing signs of childhood stress and ways to cope,' and 'How to create a positive emotional environment for children.' The scale's internal consistency was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .9$).

The second part of the questionnaire investigated teachers' attitudes toward the importance of mental health training in teacher success in the classroom. Participants were asked to respond to the extent to which each statement was essential to teacher success in the classroom on a five-point Likert scale (1-*Not at all important to teacher success in the classroom* to 5-*Very important and essential to teacher success in the classroom*). The questionnaire had been translated into Greek and used in previous Greek studies (Panagopoulou, 2014). The scale's internal consistency was considered to be high (Cronbach's $A = .95$).

In accordance with the survey of Panagopoulou (2014), teachers were asked if their studies had adequately prepared them to manage their students' mental health issues. Answers were demanded in a split response "Yes/ No". Two open-ended questions were included as well, asking teachers to mention specific mental health issues that should be integrated in the teachers' training and, therefore, to make useful recommendations which will help boost teachers' readiness to deal with mental health issues in the school environment in the future.

Results

University studies predicted teachers' readiness to deal with mental health problems ($p=0.03$; $df=24$). Teachers who were able to deal with mental health problems had previously stated that their previous studies had prepared them to do so ($p=0.000$; $df=16$). Moreover, training courses predicted teachers' readiness to deal with certain mental health problems ($p=0.000$; $df=63$). Teachers who had attended training courses claimed to be more prepared to deal with bullying ($p=0.001$; $df=10$), cultural differences ($p=0.000$; $df=15$), learning problems ($p=0.000$; $df=15$) and behavioral problems ($p=0.000$; $df=15$). Teachers with more years of teaching experience had attended more training courses ($p=0.027$; $df=63$). In addition, years of teaching experience also predicted teachers' readiness to deal with mental health problems, like divorce ($p=0.029$), cultural

differences ($p=0.018$), abuse (physical, sexual) ($p=0.048$) and bereavement ($p=0.024$).

Most of the teachers (48.7%) claimed that they were not prepared to deal with mental health problems in their class. Twenty (20) teachers (17.7%) did not answer such a question, possibly indicating their inability to be aware of whether they are ready or not to deal with such issues. Only a minority of teachers (33.6%) agreed that they were ready to deal with the mental health problems of their students.

Teachers suggested a wide range of other mental health issues that are prevalent in students, like divorce, management of negative emotions, unintentional behavior, interpersonal administration, losing a parent, children with disabilities, depression, health problems management, autism, administration social problems, mental resilience and early adolescence.

What is more, teachers suggested ways for enhancing their readiness in addressing mental health issues. In addition, most of them (30.1%) suggested seminars to be held in their school by the government, while others (24.8%) proposed social workers and psychologists to be hired in public schools. Some (13.3%) proposed the appearance of other auxiliary school services which will help them deal with mental health issues.

Discussion

Previous studies have assessed teachers' perceptions of their ability to recognize and deal with mental health problems of their students (Reinke et al., 2011), but few are carried out in the Greek education setting. University studies predicted teachers' readiness to deal with mental health problems. Teachers who were able to deal with mental health problems claimed that their previous studies had prepared them to do so. Training courses predicted teachers' readiness to deal with certain mental health problems (like bullying, cultural differences, learning & behavioral problems). Years of teaching experience also predicted teachers' readiness to deal with mental health problems (like divorce, cultural differences, abuse, bereavement). These findings are consistent with previous findings which have shown that teachers' lack of educational training was considered to make them inadequately equipped to recognize and deal effectively with mental health problems of their students (Headley, 2013; Reinke et al., 2011; Panagopoulou, 2014).

In accordance with previous studies (Rothi et al., 2008; Walter et al., 2006), the majority of Greek teachers claimed that they were not prepared to deal with mental health problems after their previous studies. Modern reality requires teacher to play more than one role in school play (Rothi et al., 2008; Reinke et al., 2011), securing both the mental and the physical health of the student. Unfortunately, the present study cannot support such a statement.

Teachers suggested other mental health issues that are prevalent in students, like divorce and management of negative emotions. In fact, such mental health issues have shown to be particularly prevalent in childhood in previous studies (Kessler et al., 2005). Teachers also suggested other ways to enhance their readiness in addressing mental health issues, like seminars, social workers in schools and other auxiliary school services.

Further investigation may focus on the effects of low mental health issues on students themselves. Previous studies have shown that young people affected by mental illness display low school performance (Xatzichristos & Hopf, 1991; Artero et al., 2001; Gigi et al., 2014), low levels of social interaction, face problems with the law and score higher drop-out rates and higher teenage pregnancy rates (Breslau et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2009; Vigod et al., 2014; Kim-Cohen et al., 2003; Collishaw et al., 2004).

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