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Training Needs of Educators in Nursery and Preschool Centers

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Abstract

The training of educators in Municipal Nursery and Preschool Centers in our country is more of a hope than a reality. The lack of an official institutional framework for training has contributed to the search for professional development based on the individual initiative of educators, without state support. The training needs of educators remain an uncharted area, and very few studies have addressed the issue of educators' training needs, which is the research goal of this paper. Specifically, this study investigates the training needs of educators in the Municipal Nursery and Preschool Centers of Kalamata as a case study. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study explores the problems faced by educators in their work to identify their training needs. Using semi-structured interviews as a research tool to collect data, the needs of thirteen educators from various specialties (Kindergarten Teachers, Preschool Nurses, and Preschool Assistant Nurses) were examined, selected through convenience sampling. The thematic analysis method was employed to analyze the data. The research results reveal that educators primarily identify problems in dealing with children with developmental disorders, communication with children who speak a different mother tongue, and cooperation with children's parents, while trying to address these problems on their own or by turning to colleagues. Their training needs stem from deficiencies in their basic education, as well as from problems they face in their pedagogical work. These needs are also influenced by the age of the children in their group and their years of experience.

Keywords: Training Needs, Educators in Nursery and Preschool Centers

1. Introduction

Since their establishment, Nursery and Preschool Centers have been tasked with fulfilling a dual role: the care and education of young children as well as the support of working parents. It is a well-established fact that young children learn and develop their abilities through interaction with the adults who care for them. The responsiveness of adults to the needs of young children also affects the quality of care they receive. The educational staff in Preschool and Nursery Centers (P&NC) is required to respond to this demanding and challenging task, which involves educating and caring for preschool-aged children up to their enrollment in compulsory education

(Kindergarten). Specifically, educators ensure the holistic development of children and address their developmental and learning needs. Therefore, they must be well-trained to provide high-quality preschool education and care services while also developing professionally.

It is widely acknowledged that the educational qualifications of teachers, i.e., the level of their basic education, are not sufficient to meet all the challenges they will face in their profession (OECD, 2009). The same applies to the educators in Preschool and Nursery Centers. A key role in the updating and renewal of the knowledge and skills of educators is their ongoing professional development. In the international literature, the professional development of educators has been linked to the quality of early childhood education and care provided (European Commission, 2014; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; OECD, 2018). However, in our country, beyond the basic education that educators in P&NC have, there is no institutional framework for professional development, as is the case in other education levels. Furthermore, research has shown that the effectiveness of professional development is greater when it meets the characteristics and professional development needs of educators (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2020; Mitchell & Cubay, 2003; Mitter & Putcha, 2018).

In Greece, however, empirical research on the professional development needs of educators is scarce and remains an area that needs exploration. This topic is the subject of research for this study. Specifically, this study aims to investigate the professional development needs of the educators working in the Preschool and Nursery Centers of the Municipality of Kalamata.

2.The Concept of Educational Needs in the Context of Adult Education

To define the concept of educational need, it is essential to distinguish it from related concepts. Vergidis (2008, p. 27) clarifies that need should not be confused with necessity, desire, or demand. Necessity refers to needs imposed without question, desire to personal wants, and demand to the economic principle of supply and demand. McCaslin & Tibenzida (1998) distinguish need from "wants" and interest, where desire is related to individual wants, and interest to personal concerns. Wilson & Easen (1995, p. 275) emphasize that "wants" stem from intuition, whereas needs are a requirement due to deficiencies in the educator.

Need is often defined as the gap between the present and desired state (Gupta, 2007), with Leagans (1964, p. 92) likening it to the difference between "what is" and "what ought to be." Scriven & Roth (1978, p. 3) define need as the gap between the actual and satisfactory, emphasizing adequacy. Similarly, Sava (2012, p. 28) views need as the difference between the current and desired state, linked to the context that created it.

Educational need, specifically, is defined as the lack or difference in knowledge, skills, or attitudes necessary for achieving a desired state, and can be satisfied through learning. Ellis (1968, cited in Saraswathi, 1969, p. 20) identifies four characteristics of educational needs: they must be necessary, lacking, claim valid action, and be addressed through learning. Monette (1977, p. 119) views educational needs as something that can be met through learning experiences. Chasapis (2000, p. 32) similarly defines educational need as the gap between what is necessary and what is available in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Sava (2012) adds that viewing need only as a gap may focus too much on learners' weaknesses, whereas it could also motivate learners to set higher goals. Knowles (1980) defines educational need as the gap between current and required ability, important for performance, and stresses that self-assessment by adult learners is crucial in identifying their needs (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Ayers (2010, p. 343) notes the debate over whether learners can objectively identify their own needs, raising the question of who is best suited to recognize them (Monette, 1977).

Educational needs are categorized in the literature into types like "felt," "unfelt," "real," "subjective," "objective," "expressed," "emergent," and "normative" (Leagans, 1964; Pearce, 1995; Sava, 2012; Ayers, 2011). Vergidis (2008, p. 32-33) identifies two dimensions: subjective (individual awareness of deficiencies) and objective (externally imposed changes). He categorizes educational needs into conscious and explicit, conscious but not

explicit, and latent/unconscious (Vergidis, 2008). This categorization influences the methods used to investigate educational needs in adult education programs.

2.1. The Concept of Investigating Educational Needs in the Design of Adult Education Programs

Investigation of educational needs is defined as the research process of identifying the educational needs of one or more individuals through the collection and analysis of information (Kapsalis & Papastamatis, 2000, p. 29).

According to Vergidis (2008), depending on the type of educational needs, the method of investigation is selected. If the needs of a target population are considered to be conscious and explicit, the quantitative research method is deemed most appropriate. In this case, the descriptive sampling method is typically used, with questionnaires or structured interviews and the application of statistical methods for analyzing the results. When the needs are considered to be implicit or latent, the qualitative research method is more suitable. For data collection in the qualitative approach to investigating needs, methods such as observation (participatory or non-participatory) and interviews (individual or group) are usually used. However, since the needs of a population do not fall exclusively into the categories of conscious and explicit or implicit and latent, a multi-method approach is recommended for the investigation. The use of multiple methods for investigating needs (Triangulation) leads to more reliable results and thus a more effective design of educational programs (Vergidis, 2008). Specifically, for the investigation of latent educational needs, Vergidis (2012).

2.2. Role of Investigating Educational Needs in Adapting and Implementing Training Programs

Investigating educational needs is crucial for the design and implementation of training programs, as it ensures that the content and methods of instruction are tailored to the actual needs of the participants. According to Kapsalis and Papastamatis (2000), understanding the needs of learners helps identify gaps in their knowledge and skills, allowing for the development of programs that are truly useful and effective.

The need for ongoing assessment of training needs becomes even more pressing in continuous adult education programs, where participants may come from diverse professional fields and have different levels of education and experience. The success of the program depends on its ability to address the varied needs of these participants, as well as its capacity to recognize and incorporate their different preferences and learning requirements.

Vergidis (2008) emphasizes that the investigation of needs must be a dynamic process that adapts to changes and developments in educational needs throughout the program's implementation. This requires regular review and adjustment of the program to ensure it remains effective and relevant. Furthermore, using methods such as analyzing data from training outcomes and feedback from participants can provide valuable insights for further improving the program.

The involvement of learners in the process of investigating needs is also critical to the program's success, as it enhances their sense of ownership and active engagement, leading to better learning outcomes and greater satisfaction.

2.3. The Importance of Investigating the Training Needs of Teachers and Educators as a Prerequisite for Effective Training

According to Vergidis (2008), investigating educational needs is crucial in designing adult education programs. The investigation guides the identification of educational goals, objectives, and content, ensuring that the program meets participants' needs. By addressing these needs, the program enhances participant involvement and its overall success. Similarly, effective teacher training depends on aligning it with teachers' needs, expectations, and challenges (Matsagoura, 2005, as cited in Andris, 2016). Papastamatis et al. (2009) argue that teachers should be involved in designing training programs to ensure they meet their real needs. They highlight that failure to address these needs is a major flaw in Greek training initiatives, as also noted by Katsarou and Dedouli (2008), who emphasize the interdependence between needs investigation and the training process.

For preschool educators, training effectiveness is similarly tied to their specific needs and backgrounds. Given the diverse educational backgrounds of preschool staff, both in Greece and internationally, training content and delivery must align with their knowledge, skills, and experiences (Mitchell & Cubay, 2003; Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001). Mitter & Putcha (2018) further stress that effective training is most impactful when it matches the individual and contextual needs of educators. They also highlight that training tends to be limited to staff working with younger children and those in rural areas.

3. Preschool Education in Europe and Greece

The preschool age is currently considered the most important period in a person's life, as it is during this time that the foundations are laid for their later academic path, personal development, and lifelong learning. A large number of studies have linked the significance of quality preschool education and care with positive outcomes, both in terms of children's academic and social skills and in terms of positive effects on their health (Gregoriadis, Grammatikopoulos & Zachopoulou, 2018). Preschool education and care services are a strategic social investment in many OECD countries and European Union member states (Council of the European Union, 2019). Although the reasons for this investment are primarily economic and then social (Gregoriadis, Grammatikopoulos & Zachopoulou, 2018), the expansion of preschool education and care to serve a larger number of children, as well as its qualitative enhancement, is considered essential, as it is linked to lifelong learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; OECD, 2006).

3.1. Preschool Frameworks in Europe and Educational Personnel

Although preschool education's importance in child development is widely acknowledged, it is not viewed as a unified system across EU and OECD countries. Preschool structures vary, with two main models: unified systems and separated systems, as well as a mixed model in some countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; Urban et al., 2011). Unified systems offer services for the entire preschool age range, with children staying within the same framework until they start primary school. These systems exist in fewer than a third of European countries, including Finland, Sweden, and Slovenia, and are typically funded and regulated by the Ministry of Education.

In contrast, separated systems divide preschool care and education into two structures, each governed by different bodies. Care structures cater to children up to age 3 or 4, while preschool education structures serve older children. Access to education structures is legally guaranteed, but this is not the case for care structures. Separated systems are found in nearly half of European countries, including Belgium, France, and Greece (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; OECD, 2006). Additionally, private providers offer preschool care and education, with home-based care being a common option in several countries, such as France and Germany, and often regulated by law.

In separated systems, differences extend to the educational personnel, with staff qualifications varying between care and education structures. Educators in education structures generally require a higher education degree (Bachelor), while staff in care structures tend to have fewer qualifications. Assistant educators, who do not require higher education in most countries, play a significant role in preschool education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a). Urban et al. (2011) argue that there is no uniform category for preschool staff across Europe.

Furthermore, differences exist in continuing education and professional development for educators. Ongoing professional development is mandatory in only a few countries (e.g., Scotland, Luxembourg, Romania), and while it is required for educators of children over three years old in fewer than half of the systems, it is often optional for those working with children under three (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a, 2019b).

3.2. Municipal Nursery and Kindergarten Schools in Greece

In Greece, early childhood education is divided into two main categories: early childhood care and education for younger children (up to 4 years old) and preschool education for children aged 4–6 years old. Preschool education falls under the responsibility of kindergartens, which are part of the compulsory education system and fall under the Ministry of Education, while early childhood care and education are provided in Nursery and Kindergarten Schools (hereafter referred to as P&KS) that fall under the Ministry of the Interior. Municipalities or private individuals meeting the establishment and operation requirements, as set out in Ministerial Decision D22/oik. 11828/293/2017, have the right to establish P&KS.

The operational framework for Municipal Nursery and Kindergarten Schools is defined by the Standard Operating Regulation, which was updated in 2017 by Joint Ministerial Decision 41087/29-11-2017. These P&KS are services provided by the municipalities or municipal legal entities. Additionally, each municipality has the right to issue its own Regulation, provided that it adheres to the minimum standards outlined in the Standard Operating Regulation. According to this regulation, "Nursery, Infant, and Kindergarten Schools are primarily educational and pedagogical structures for preschool children, aiming to:

- Provide preschool care and education based on the most up-to-date scientific data.
- Raise parents' awareness of contemporary pedagogy and psychology, offering them information and guidance.
- Assist children in their smooth transition from the family to the school environment, as well as into the broader social and educational context.
- Provide daily nutrition and care for the children, ensuring hygiene and safety standards.
- Facilitate working and unemployed parents (Law 41087/29-11-2017. Government Gazette B 4249/5-12-2017, p. 55989).

Furthermore, the Regulation addresses issues related to the operational framework of the schools, the criteria for the enrollment and hosting of children, health and nutrition provisions, general guidelines for approaching children by the staff during the daily activities, and the general duties of all staff specialties. An important feature is that these schools do not have a formal curriculum like kindergartens but follow a "daily activity schedule," which is the responsibility of the educator and is not detailed in the Standard Operating Regulation.

Municipal Infant Schools host children from 2 months to 2.5 years old, while Municipal Kindergarten Schools host children from 2.5 years old until their registration in compulsory education—Kindergarten. Their operation lasts from 7:00 AM to 4:00 PM to accommodate working parents. Attendance at these schools is not compulsory but is part of the social policy for children and their families. For this reason, the regulation includes social criteria for the enrollment of children when the number of applications exceeds available places. Additionally, the regulation provides for a financial contribution from parents (fees) for the care of children, determined by the Municipal Council's decision.

As part of the social policy, in recent years many Municipal P&KS have been integrated into subsidized programs through ESF (European Social Fund), such as the European program "Harmonizing Family and Work Life" (Joint Ministerial Decision 0.8363/oik.3.1434/29-04-2010, Government Gazette 556/B/29-4-2010) and, since 2020, the program "Financial Support for Families with Preschool-Aged Children" (Joint Ministerial Decision D11/oik. 32940/1376/26-08-2020). The goal is to integrate as many children as possible under 4 years old into early childhood care and education. These programs subsidize working and unemployed mothers with infants and toddlers to secure a place for their children in preschool care and education structures (P&KS). For the implementation of these programs, municipalities have hired additional staff on fixed-term contracts to staff the schools.

3.3 The case of the Municipal Childcare and Preschool Stations in Kalamata

In Kalamata, Greece, there are 7 Municipal Childcare Stations, including 4 with both infant and preschool sections and 3 with only preschool sections. Two infant sections are currently under construction. Infant sections serve children from 18 months to 2.5 years old, while preschool sections cater to children from 2.5 years old until

compulsory education begins. The Municipality has implemented two years of compulsory preschool education. Staffing varies by section, with infant sections employing 2 educators and one assistant, while preschool sections have 2 educators (usually a teacher and an assistant). The staff includes Kindergarten Teachers, Nursery Nurses, and Assistant Nursery Nurses, with some holding the position of Responsible Operator for each station. Less than half of the staff are permanent employees; the rest are on renewable contracts via the ESF Program, with occasional short-term contracts.

In the last ten years, the educators have received limited training, with only three seminars held. These included First Aid training, an earthquake safety seminar organized by the Fire Department, and a seminar on early intervention for preschool children organized by the Municipality of Kalamata.

4. Method

This section presents the research methodology.

4.1 Research question

Our research question was: “What are the problems that educators working in the Municipal Kindergarten Schools of Kalamata, Greece, face in their work?”

4.2 Research Method -Research Tool

To investigate the subjective dimension of the participants, a qualitative approach was employed, as it provides the appropriate framework for "recording, analyzing, interpreting, and understanding the experiences and subjective meanings" (Isari & Pourkos, 2015, p. 43), and allows for the revelation of "the variety of perspectives" of the participants (Flick, 2017, p. 31). The research strategy followed is a case study, since it concerns educators working in the Municipal Kindergarten Schools of Kalamata, Greece, during the school year 2020-2021. According to Robson (2010), a case study is more a research strategy than a research method and focuses on a phenomenon in its context. We determined that the semi-structured interview is the optimal choice for the following reasons. The source of our data was the experiences and opinions of the educators, so the data needed to be drawn from their own words through their active participation in the research. The open-ended questions that make up the interview are a way of obtaining rich, in-depth information that reveals the perspective of the participants (Braun & Clark, 2013). Furthermore, the semi-structured interview provides 'a margin of freedom and the possibility to control the conditions of the interview' (Mason, 2003, p. 97) for both the researcher and the interviewee. The researcher can obtain in-depth information with additional questions, and the interviewee can ask for clarifications regarding the questions they receive (Mason, 2003).

4.3 Sample

As for the selection of participants in the study, convenience sampling was used, as it utilized the availability and willingness of the participants to take part in the research and the researchers' easy access to the educators (Creswell, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The sample selected using this method is not considered representative, but rather self-representative, which is why it is often chosen in case studies (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), such as the present one. The participants in the study were 13 educators, all female. Specifically, the study involved four Kindergarten teachers (PE), five Early Childhood Educators/Infant and Toddler Caregivers (TE), and four Assistant Infant and Toddler Caregivers (DE), two of whom were high school graduates and two vocational school (IEK) graduates. The ages of the participants ranged from 37 to 55 years, and most of them worked with continuous, renewable fixed-term contracts (S.O.X) through the ESF program, while three educators were permanent employees and two had indefinite contracts.

4.4 Data analysis method

For the analysis of the collected data thematic content analysis was applied, as it is a "flexible" method that combines a range of data collection techniques and can be applied to various sample sizes (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 183; Creswell, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) This is a research method that employs a set of procedures, methods, and techniques to draw valid conclusions (Weber, 1990, p. 9).

5. Results

This section portrays the research results.

5.1. Problems educators face in working with children

Question 1 addressed the problems they have encountered in their work with children, asking for examples to highlight the difficulties encountered by educators in daily practice.

In the majority of cases (8 out of 13), educators from all specialties reported developmental disorders presented by the children. These developmental issues created challenges in managing and pedagogically addressing the needs of these children. Autism (7 references) was one of the most frequently mentioned problems. Specifically, Educator 7 mentioned, "Yes... I had a child in the distant past, and later I realized, as I studied to understand, that the child probably had autism. But unfortunately, the knowledge and experience I had at the time did not help me understand what exactly was happening, and I had a hard time adjusting to the child." Similarly, there were reports of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (4 references). Educator 10 shared, "I had a child who was very hyperactive. I couldn't manage them easily. No matter what activities I tried, I couldn't engage them. They wouldn't listen, and with other colleagues, we struggled. In the end, I couldn't handle this child, I couldn't calm them down." Additionally, there were two references to issues related to dyslexia, though there were no detailed mentions of how the problems were addressed by the educators. Educator 5 stated, "There were just some dyslexia issues that were recognized at this stage of age, and after that, they would receive therapies either from an occupational therapist or a speech therapist, depending on the case, but not severe cases." In the developmental disorders category, there was also a mention of pedagogical handling regarding children's speech development. Educator 2 recalled, "I remember another child who hadn't developed speech properly. I believe this creates a problem because we don't know the right way to approach them to help them more. I find a weakness in myself in not knowing how to manage this and help them."

Other issues encountered by educators included behavioral problems (3 references), such as aggressive behaviors (biting, hitting) from children. Educator 3 said, "Behavioral problems, nervousness due to family situations. There were children who hit, bit, all these years." There were also mentions of children's reactions due to family-related issues (1 reference), as Educator 8 explained: "There was a child who, while working on the family topic, sat at a table and cried. I went up to see why they were crying, and they told me their parents were divorced, and the behavior of the parents—fighting constantly..."

From the educators' responses (3 references), it was evident that in some cases, the problems they faced with specific children made it difficult for them to manage the entire class. Educator 11 mentioned, "The child had many behavioral difficulties, couldn't participate in any group activities... I had a lot of trouble controlling the group because the child disrupted the whole class, and that was the biggest issue." Similarly, Educator 13 added, "For example, I remember the hyperactive child... due to the commotion they caused, because they were constantly moving, talking incoherently, I couldn't maintain calm and balance in the class."

Additionally, issues were raised regarding classroom layout (1 reference), and the large number of children in the group (2 references). Educator 10 said, "One year, I had a lot of trouble because the number of children was very high, and consequently, it was difficult to manage them within the classroom."

5.2. Problems educators face with parents

The next question (question 2) focused on problems educators face with parents. The majority of educators (11 out of 13) mentioned communication, trust, and collaboration issues with parents. According to the educators, problems arise when they have to inform parents about an issue with their child, as parents often react with denial or skepticism (8 references). Educator 11 commented, "It was like the parents didn't recognize the problem, like everything was normal. They didn't listen to me, didn't believe me; they didn't want to believe me. I don't know what to say." At the same time, an issue arises regarding the way educators inform parents about their child's problem (4 references). Educator 4 explained, "Some parents aren't receptive to the idea that their child might have an issue. And it requires a very careful approach on how to present this to them," and Educator 9 said, "I learned last year that I need to approach them very carefully, because they get scared, they start to doubt, they feel defensive." Educators also mentioned problems in cooperation with parents when the latter are facing family issues such as divorce (2 references). As Educator 3 mentioned, "In recent years, I've encountered some cases of divorced parents or parents separated who hadn't settled their issues. For example, I've had cases where the mother, who was separated from her husband, would tell me not to give the child to him if he or his mother came."

5.3. Ways to address problems

Question 3 explored how educators addressed the problems mentioned earlier. Three educators turned to the parents through dialogue to address the issues: "I always try to handle problems with parents through discussion. The same goes for children—if I identify an issue, something causing difficulty in the group, I prefer to invite the parents to a meeting so we can discuss the child's problem and find a solution" (Educator 6). Similarly, three educators sought help from their work environment by turning to colleagues and the station supervisor: "Definitely with a lot of patience and cooperation with the department head and the station supervisor" (Educator 13). Five educators mentioned that they attempted to address the problems by applying the best practice they thought was suitable, either with the parents or the children, without mentioning seeking help or support from others. Educator 12 noted, "With parents, other than staying calm, there's nothing else you can do. What else can you do... (...). The child with ADHD, I would engage them for some time... And the child with autism, again, I would engage them myself."

There were also cases where educators (3 references) mentioned that although they tried to discuss the issue with the parents, they ultimately couldn't resolve the problem. As Educator 7 said, "I tried individual informational meetings with the mother, but she was negative and didn't believe her child had a problem... and in the end, I couldn't resolve the issue."

5.4. Support in addressing problems

The following question (question 4) sought to investigate who the educators turn to when they face difficulties and why. More than half of the educators (7 references) said they initially turn to their work environment, colleagues. Educator 8 said, "I usually turn to a colleague because we work together and have been collaborating for years. I trust her; she has more years of experience, and I consult her a lot. So when I have a problem, I turn to her." Most educators (9 references) turn to the hierarchy (the supervisor of the station or higher authorities). Educator 6 said, "It depends on the difficulty. I usually prefer to turn to the supervisor of the nursery school first because I think that's their role... to try to find solutions for any daily difficulties in the nursery school or related to any educator, child, or anything else." Three educators mentioned that they approach different people or sources depending on the problem. Educator 5 noted, "First, I turn to my assistant, if they can help me, at least to a certain point, and then to the station supervisor. For practical issues, mainly. For educational matters, I consult the internet or other colleagues." Besides colleagues or superiors, educators also turn to the internet (4 references) or a specialist (2 references). "As I said earlier, I consult colleagues with more experience and the supervisor, but also books, the internet, and sometimes I consult a specialist" (Educator 11), "If I happen to know a specialist, I try to take advantage of the connection to gather information and get help regarding the issue I'm struggling to handle" (Educator 6).

Additionally, two educators emphasized the lack of a specialist within the nursery, so they either don't approach anyone else ("There's no one, because there's no specialist... (laughs)... If there was a child psychologist, something could be done...") (Educator 7) or look for alternative ways (internet, seminars) "There's no specialist at the nursery to turn to. That's something I try to handle by using new methods, staying updated through the internet and seminars I've attended" (Educator 1). In their responses about why they turn to specific people or sources, they mention turning to colleagues due to their greater experience or because of trust, as well as supervisors because they are perceived as experts who can help with finding solutions. Other responses emphasized practical advice for handling specific situations and obtaining information. From the series of their references, it appears that they turn to the internet or a specialist for support, or if they believe that their colleagues or superiors cannot help them with the problem they are facing.

5.5. Problems in integrating foreign children

Next, question 5 is more specific and was included in the interview to explore whether educators face difficulties integrating children who speak different languages or are from foreign countries, and what kinds of problems they encounter. The majority of educators (8 educators) mention language differences as a communication, understanding, and ultimately integration issue for these children. "Let's say children who cannot understand us at all and unfortunately cannot understand the various activities we do. This is the hardest part because they cannot integrate into the group" (S5). They also identify the difficulty the rest of the children face in understanding and communicating with the non-native speaking child: "The only problem I've encountered is the language. (...) And this results in the children not understanding very well when I speak to them, I don't understand what they say, and they can't communicate with the other children" (S4). In two instances (2 references), the use of the mother tongue at home by the family is seen as a barrier to learning Greek: "...the parents don't speak Greek, it's very difficult, the mother doesn't cooperate because she doesn't speak Greek very well, the sister only speaks when she goes to primary school" (S9).

Additionally, only three educators mentioned the different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the children as an issue related to their pedagogical work: "But I've often faced hesitations on how I will develop a topic related to our national holiday... or a topic related to... it probably includes our religion" (S7).

Out of all the educators, two mentioned that they have never had children in their class who speak another language or come from another country. However, they stated that communication issues would arise due to language differences, as S8 specifically mentions: "So far, I haven't encountered it. However, if a child were to come from another country, it would definitely be difficult for me to communicate with them if they don't speak Greek."

Furthermore, three educators commented on the long period of time it takes for children to learn the language and communicate with the others: "Well, we try over time, but it takes time when they don't know any Greek, it's difficult" (S3). Finally, only one educator mentioned having experience with children from different nationalities: "I haven't encountered any problems because... it happens to be a subject I worked on in the early years of my career. (...) I was part of a research intercultural program" (S7).

5.6. Problems due to lack of pedagogical activity program

As mentioned in the theoretical part, there is no officially established pedagogical activity program for Pre-School and Day Care Centers. The last two questions (questions 6 and 7) aimed to investigate whether educators face issues due to the lack of a program. In question 6, they were asked about their opinion on the absence of a program. All educators, except for one, believe that there should be an official program in the form of a general framework-guide with opportunities for adaptation: "I believe it would be good to have a broader framework, a general guideline as to where we should go, and each educator, seeing the abilities of the children in the class, would adjust this program accordingly" (S4). Most educators describe an ideal program by outlining the features of a functional program for them. Specifically, three educators used the term "guideline" to describe the program: "It would be good to have an activity program. We should have a guideline to follow and then add whatever we want. But it would be good if there was an organized program" (S3). Three educators mentioned that they would prefer the

program to be more specific, so they could refer to it for both activity development topics and ideas for activities: "It's useful because I think it would give me ideas, and it would definitely help me with my doubts about whether I'm choosing the right activities and the right topics to teach the children" (S13).

In contrast, four educators emphasized the flexibility of the program so that it can be adjusted to the needs, ages, and abilities of the children in their class. S1 mentioned, "On the other hand, I think there should be a program where each educator could adjust it according to the needs of the children." The flexibility of the program was also the reason why only one educator mentioned that she does not want an official program: "On the one hand, I think I've concluded that I prefer the current system, the free development of topics that I choose, because I believe that what I choose fits better with my class, and the children like it, providing them with experiential learning" (S6).

Subsequently, question 7 explored what educators rely on when designing the pedagogical program in practice. The answers varied, showing that, due to the lack of an official program, educators look for different sources to design the activities for their classes. The characteristics of the children's group (8 references) are some of the main factors influencing the design of the pedagogical program, whether these characteristics relate to the children's age or their needs: "And I mainly rely on the age of the children I'm working with and their needs depending on their age" (S8).

Six educators (4 kindergarten teachers and 2 daycare workers) stated that they rely on the knowledge they gained from their studies: "Usually... based on the new program, the curriculum, because I've also finished kindergarten teacher school" (S1), "On the knowledge I have from my school and from my postgraduate studies now. But also on the needs of the group each time" (S7). All kindergarten teachers (4 references) mention that, due to their degree, they rely on the Kindergarten Curriculum and adapt it to the age group of the children they work with each time: "So, yes, I follow the official kindergarten program, I get updated on any changes, and I adjust it based on the age and the material, the level of the children in the class" (S9). In contrast, no daycare assistants mentioned relying on knowledge gained from their studies.

Furthermore, four educators mentioned the time of year as a basis for designing the activity program, depending on the season, holidays, and daily life: "I rely on the seasons, the holidays, the traditions of the country, current events, but often I deviate and rely on the stimuli provided by daily life" (S6). Alongside the previous answers, some educators also mentioned that they refer to the internet (3 references), colleagues (3 references), and books (3 references) to facilitate designing the program: "Yes, I use the curriculum guide for kindergarten teachers as a basis. Then... ideas from books or the internet, but I also exchange information and ideas with colleagues" (S11).

6. Conclusions

From our research on the problems faced by educators in their pedagogical work, the following conclusions arise: The vast majority of educators in the Municipal Childcare and Preschool Stations of Kalamata face problems in the daily management and pedagogical handling of children with some type of developmental disorder. The problems they mentioned mainly focus on individual cases of children who were difficult to handle or manage, while the reported developmental disorder is often their personal judgment or assessment and is not accompanied by an official diagnosis from the competent authority. The management and pedagogical handling of children with autism and ADHD are among the most frequent problems faced by educators, followed by issues related to children's behavior and classroom management. Although developmental issues were not the only problems mentioned, the frequency of responses and the priority given to them highlight the seriousness of the issue, which may overshadow other concerns that create smaller problems for educators. Furthermore, the problems mentioned regarding the relationship between educators and parents seem largely to stem from the challenges educators face with the children. Specifically, communication, trust, and cooperation issues with parents were raised, especially when educators need to inform them about a problem the child is facing.

Additionally, educators seem not to follow an organized approach to address these problems; each educator decides how to proceed depending on the issue at hand. Specifically, their responses differed when asked how

they dealt with the aforementioned problems and when asked whom they turn to when facing difficulties. In Question “How did they deal with the problems?” only three mentioned they turned to colleagues, while in the next question (Who do they turn to?), the majority answered colleagues and superiors due to experience or trust. This particular question warrants further investigation.

The integration of foreign or non-native language children had not been presented as a problem by the educators until they were specifically asked about it. The main problem they face is communication due to the language barrier, which, in turn, is considered by educators as the cause of unsuccessful integration of non-native language children into the classroom. Educators seem to equate the integration of these children with learning the Greek language. The different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students were considered a problem by a small minority of educators. This could be interpreted in various ways: either educators do not perceive ethnic and cultural differences as a problem because they know how to address it pedagogically, or they do not consider it a problem and treat all children as a homogeneous group without recognizing their unique ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Based on the educators' responses to this specific question, the use of the third person (e.g., "to integrate") in relation to the children's integration, the belief that integration will happen over time by the children themselves, and the lack of reference to any intercultural pedagogical intervention on their part leads us to adopt the second interpretation. The communication problem due to the children's different language agrees with the findings of Kalomiri (2020) and Koutroubis (2019), while the absence of intercultural approaches aligns with the findings of Kalomiri (2020).

Consequently, the lack of an official pedagogical program concerns the educators, who consider an official guide program necessary, one that responds to the ages and needs of the children hosted in the Childcare and Preschool Stations. Having become accustomed to designing the pedagogical program on their own, they describe an ideal program, whether more flexible or more specific, depending on the difficulties they face in its design. Additionally, the specialty and education of the educators influence the design of the program they implement in their department. Kindergarten Teachers adjust the Kindergarten Curriculum to the ages of the children in the Childcare Stations, while Nursery Nurses are more flexible in designing the program as they are more familiar with the age group of children in the stations due to their training. Assistant Nursery Nurses, although not responsible for designing the department's program, refer to various sources for ideas, as do the other specialties.

As for the problems faced by educators in their pedagogical work, unfortunately, no studies were found, other than Kalomiri (2020) and Koutroubi (2019), to compare the results with this one.

From the previous analysis, the urgent need for the continuous, organized, and targeted professional development of educators working in Preschool and Nursery Schools becomes clear. This development should be aligned with their training needs, as identified through the challenges they face in their daily teaching and educational practice.

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