

## Greek primary school Teacher's Beliefs About the School Principal's Role in Promoting Differentiation

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### ABSTRACT

The challenges of modern social and educational reality necessitate the adaption and reinforcement of the school principal's role in the process of performing a really demanding work.

This paper investigates the degree of support provided by the educational institution to the teachers who wish to implement differentiated instruction.

In the present research, quantitative method of data is utilized by using the questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions to Greek teachers from the region of Epirus.

The findings of the research showed that the school principal's role, activity and personality are key factors for the successful implementation of differentiation. The results, though limited, are the starting point for further exploration of the subject, and this would be particularly important as the potential for innovative alternative teaching methods could be increased and this may contribute dynamically to the expansion of learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** school principal, effective management, differentiated instruction

### Introduction

Modern educational systems emphasize the need not only of staffing for transacting administrative tasks, but also of effectively fulfilling the multidimensional role of leadership in the school unit. The success of the school unit and therefore of all its members, as it is demonstrated by the educational research, is significantly influenced by the role of its school principal (NCSL, 2007).

The school unit where high learning outcomes are achieved highlights the role of the school principal who, with skills and dedication, enhances the development of appropriate teaching and learning conditions (The Wallace Foundation, 2009).

The modern educational system requires a school principal with the characteristics of a successful leader and a competent manager. Reconciliation between 'manager' and 'leader' is necessary in order to drive the school to progress and efficiency for all its members. This is because the manager has technical and interpersonal skills, using the available resources and undertaking actions to achieve the goals through planning, organizing, guidance and control (Everard et al., 2004). On the other hand the leader has the transmission of vision, the formation of a collective culture, the professional development of the staff, the formation of a collaborative framework of action and the productive thinking with features of flexibility, broadness and optimism (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Day, 2004 ; Leithwood et al., 2006 ). Actually, it is supported that the manager does the things right while the leader does the right things (Bennis & Nanus, 1997), creating values, motivations, behaviors and flexible thinking in the organization (Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

However, particular emphasis is given on both teaching and leadership by the school principal, whose primary objective is to ensure the quality in education through successful teaching and learning and consequently maximizing learning achievements (Hallinger, 2005 ; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010). The effective processing of the pedagogical role of the school principal is based on the support of a common vision for the school where collaborative and participatory processes will be developed, with priority in curriculum implementation and quality teaching and learning (Aas & Brandmo, 2016; Pasiardi & Savvidis, 2016:341-369).

The school leader is the main factor of change both in the performance of administrative tasks and in the implementation of innovative programs and alternative teaching approaches ensuring the active participation of all members of the school unit (Hargreaves & Harris, 2015).

## **Differentiated Instruction and School Principal**

Diversity is common among groups, societies, and more widely in the whole world. In this case, the educational reality makes it imperative to recognize the diversity of all, by pointing to the inability to deal with it in a common way that will be effective for everyone (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

The differentiation of teaching as an "anthropocentric pedagogical proposition" (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017) promotes equality in learning opportunities and efficiency, enriches the cognitive level, while at the same time enables all pupils to experience success (Koutselini & Agathagelou, 2009 ; Valiandes, 2015 ; Petrou and Angelidis, 2016).

By implementing differentiated instruction, teachers are able to design and implement a socially oriented teaching based on the principles of equality by ensuring equal learning opportunities (Porter, 2014).

On this basis, the differentiation of teaching contributes to the dynamic exploration and redefinition of the concept of effective school learning and to the achievement of a high quality teaching for each student (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2016 ; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2015 ; Hattie & Gan, 2011 ; Hattie, 2009).

Differentiated instruction is a high-level process that requires flexibility, ingenuity and innovation in teaching, curriculum observation, and presentation of knowledge to learners in a way that takes into account the diversity in knowledge, experience, demands, potentials and interests (Tomlinson, 2014; Santamaria, 2009).

According to Tomlinson (2014) "differentiation" means adaptation of teaching to meet the students' different needs. It is the reform of the learning process by applying alternative teaching methods to make it satisfactory in relation to students' learning readiness, requirements and learning profile.

The different way of approaching teaching for each pupil or group of students, the continuous assessment and the flexibility in grouping are elements of Differentiated instruction. A basic feature of Differentiated instruction is that it treats pupils as separate biographies rather than as copies of the same image and aims to meet cognitively the needs of each student (Koutselini, 2006).

The school principal has to promote the use of alternative and innovative teaching approaches as a leader who supports, creates a vision and gives the opportunity to the school teachers' to take initiatives and active action (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2016). The school principal's main goal is the continuous improvement of school and student performance (Schleicher, 2012) by recognizing the demands of the multidimensional heterogeneity of the student potential and the teachers' diversity.

In order to implement differentiated instruction at school, school principals may support differentiation in practice. A basic prerequisite for this is the adequate and in-depth understanding of differentiated instruction so that they can present it with absolute clarity to the teachers and convince them of its effectiveness (Tomlinson, 1999).

A large number of researches, internationally, refer to the effectiveness of differentiated instruction by pointing out the effective activation of each pupil's psychological potential (Tomlinson, 2005; Broderick et al. 2005; Lewis & Batts 2005; Anderson, 2007; Carolan & Guinn, 2007; Douglas et al., 2008; King-Shaver, 2008; Wormeli, 2011; Valiandes, 2015).

On the other hand, teachers enrich their knowledge of teaching strategies, acquire experience, exploit alternative and innovative teaching approaches and improve their role in responding to the demands of modern educational reality (Tomlinson, 2014).

The school principal should also promote different teaching models, encourage teachers to apply diversity with flexibility, creativity and choice, and provide teachers with high quality professional development opportunities as well as time to collaborate, design and to apply differentiation (Tomlinson, 1999; Koutselini, 2014).

Also the regular communication of the school principal with the pupils' parents and the authorities is important, as differentiation requires cooperation with society in order to understand its content, to implement it and to bring about results. The school principal's dynamic role supports differentiation, trusts the school's staff, recognizes teachers as autonomous personalities, involves all in the process of differentiated teaching, and assists in the design and preparation of the classroom (Allan & Tomlinson, 2000).

Research data on the school principal's characteristics for the effective implementation of differentiated instruction indicate as vital the participatory decision-making, the responsiveness to the original teachers' needs, the provision of the necessary logistics, the pedagogical management of the school program as well as the

protection from external interventions and support in cases of doubt, the care for the teacher in person and professional level, providing opportunities for development, moderation-empowerment and promotion of leaders among teachers and creating a strong culture within the school unit (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2016 ; Valiandess& Neophytou, 2016).

It is clear that the change is a difficult task that requires devotion, faith, direct involvement, systematic manner, suitable climate and culture of the school unit (Tomlinson, 1999). Strengthening the teachers' educational role for redefining, flexibility and adjustment of teaching procedures with the school principal's support is crucial and it seems to bring significant benefits to all relevant members of the educational community (Koutselini, 2014).

## **The present study**

This study aims at exploring the role of school principal in the successful implementation of differentiated instruction. Specifically, its aim is to examine the degree of support of school teachers who wish to implement differentiated instruction and therefore to identify existing support structures, the degree of satisfaction of requirements for the use of differentiated instruction and to examine the institutional conditions that have positive effect on the implementation of alternative teaching ways of thinking and teaching.

For the purposes of the present study, Differentiated Instruction is defined as a systematic approach to the design of the entire teaching by adjusting, editing the content and the final product of the curriculum for students with different readiness, learning profile and interests (Panteliadou & Antoniou, 2008).

The term "school principal" has been given a functional definition, which refers to the effectiveness of his / her role in teaching, pedagogical, professional, business, and interpersonal issues, while being the animator of all, especially of the school teachers, the pupils and pupils' parents, and make efforts on initiatives that potentially undertake both inside and outside of school with a view to highlight the school unit as a factor in changing educational activities (Stravakou, 2003).

Based on the assumption that the school principal's role may promote the implementation of differentiated instruction in modern classrooms and consequently enhance the effectiveness of the learning process, this study aims to examine teachers' beliefs about the degree of support provided by the school to teachers wishing to apply differentiated teaching.

## **Research methodology**

### **1. Sample**

In the present research quantitative methods of data are used through the use of the questionnaire with closed and some open-ended questions. The sample of this research is 289 Greek primary school teachers from the region of Epirus in Greece.

## **2. Period of the research**

The research was conducted during the period June-September of this year 2018.

## **3. Method of data collection and analysis**

The structured "closed" type questionnaire with some clarifying "open" type questions were used as a measuring instrument. The questionnaire was structured on the basis of the following four parts:

Respondent profile

1<sup>st</sup> Part: "Familiarity with Differentiated Instruction"

2<sup>nd</sup>Part:"School principal's Activation for the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction"

3<sup>rd</sup> Part:"School principal's Personality and Implementation of Differentiated Instruction 4<sup>th</sup> Part: "Educational Leadership and implementation of Differentiated Instruction ".

The length of time to complete the questionnaire did not exceed 15 minutes. After collecting the questionnaires, their codification was followed, while the statistical processing was done using the SPSS v25.0 for Windows statistical program. The statistical analysis of the data was based on an analysis of Descriptive Statistics-Cross tabulations and Correlations analysis, which was considered as the most appropriate for this research approach.

## **4. Limitations of research**

In case of this survey the basic restriction is that the taken sample of primary schools of a single prefecture of the Epirus region.

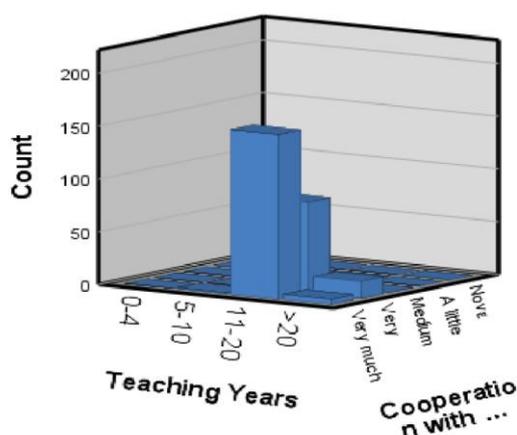
## **5. Data Presentation**

From the quantitative analysis of the data obtained from the structured questionnaire given to teachers recorded the following results:

Regarding the sample profile, it is noted that the vast majority of teachers are women in particular 62.9% of the total compared to 37.1% who are men. The age of the majority (56.5%) of the sample teachers is between 41-50 years while only 12.9% has a second degree and 4.8% has postgraduate degrees. The teaching experience of the majority of the sample ranges from 11-20 years, are permanent teachers while their school's area is urban.

In terms of familiarity with the differentiated instruction, the 87,9% of teachers said that they had been informed mainly through articles (37,7%), university lectures (35,3%), conferences (22,1%) and other sources (4,8%) such as the Internet. Both the theoretical (87,9%) and the practical framework (87,9%) of the differentiated teaching are known to the teachers, while all, 100%, stated that they wanted further and continuous training on the subject.

Regarding the school principal's activation on the implementation of differentiated instruction, it is found that for 36% (very) and 37% (very much) of teachers the practical implementation is a personal choice. For the 80,3% of the sample the school principal should not require its implementation. The school principal's daily cooperation with the teachers for the successful implementation of the differentiated instruction is very (61,4%) important especially for those teachers who have many teaching years (bar graph 1).



**Bar graph 1.** Teaching years and Cooperation with the school principal for implementing Differentiated Instruction

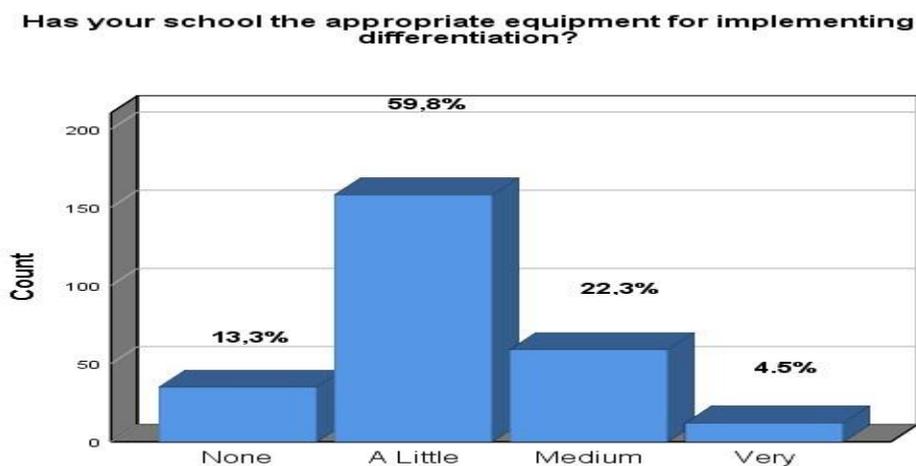
The 34,1% of teachers say that they are satisfied with the school principal's response to the implementation of differentiated instruction (table 1). Moreover 59,8% of the teachers declare that the existing equipment is minimum for the successful implementation of differentiation (table 2).

**Are you satisfied from the school principal's response on the implementation of differentiated Instruction?**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	9	3,0	3,4	3,4
	A little	38	12,7	14,4	17,8
	Somehow	64	21,4	24,2	42,0
	Very	90	30,1	34,1	76,1
	Very much	63	21,1	23,9	100,0
	Total	264	88,3	100,0	
Missing	System	35	11,7		
Total		299	100,0		

**Table 1.** Teachers' satisfaction from the school principal's response to the implementation of Differentiated Instruction

Furthermore about 48,9% seeks maintenance or improvement of existing equipment. The call for strict adherence to the Curriculum does not exist according to 71,6% of the sample. The majority of teachers said that the school principal should organize training seminars or workshops (95,1%) and presents teachings models (96,2%).



**Table 2.** Teacher's response to the available equipment at school for implementing differentiation

As a reference to the school principal's personality and the implementation of differentiated instruction, it should be noted that for the (87,1%) the school principal should provide useful advice for better use, give a vision (93,9%) to improve the educational product produced by adopting alternative teaching approaches and provide (70,5%) motivation (internally or externally) as an activation lever. In addition, the school principal's desire to collaborate with other teachers (97%) is very important, his or her support is crucial (83,3%), as even the possibility that provides for free expression of opinions (80.6%) at assemblies. The school principal's support to teachers who implements differentiated instruction in any complaints from parents or colleagues (93.5%) is important.

Concerning the category of educational leadership and implementation of differentiated instruction, by prioritizing (from the most important to the least) the responses, emerged through the research that the three main characteristics that must have a school leader for the successful implementation of differentiated instruction are a) to be cooperative (53% as a first choice), b) to has educational experience (51.5% as a second choice) and (c) to be communicative (33,7% as a third choice) and followed the demonstration of Justice (59,1%), administrative capacity (48,5%) and the capacity assessment (39%). For the successful implementation of differentiated instruction needed the training seminars (79,5%), infrastructure (86%), working with colleagues (65,2%), sampling teachings (65,5%), the flexibility of the Curriculum (65,5%), more available time (72,3%), coteaching (68,9%), the moral support of the school principal (65,2%) and finally the available student potential (69,3%).

In conclusion, prioritizing (from the most important to the least) the main factors of difficulty for the successful implementation of differentiated instruction teachers indicate that are a) the lack of supporting equipment (70,1% as first choice), b) the workload (73,5% as second choice), c) the limited available time (70,8% as third choice), d) the rigid curriculum (66,3% as fourth choice), e) the lack of motivation (60,2% as fifth choice), f) the limited knowledge (70,8% as sixth choice), g) the large number of students per classroom (66,3% as seventh choice), h) the lack of cooperation with the colleagues (75% as eighth choice), i) the insecurity or fear towards the pupils' parents (59,8% as ninth choice) and, finally, j) the lack of support by the school principal (65,5% as tenth choice).

## Discussion

The emphasis on the key features and the work done by the school principal, according to the teachers, to promote differentiated instruction in the educational process has been the main focus of this study.

Therefore, a basic finding is the teachers' desire for continuous training on differentiated instruction, is a useful finding that is also shown by Logan (2008), Nicolae (2013) and Mitsi (2012).

The majority of the teachers supported the need for collaboration, mutual trust and recognition of their work in a school climate where the element of interaction and the pursuit of a common goal is dominant. Teachers wish

to participate in decision-making and in the selection of innovative programs and are satisfied when the school culture follows characteristics of participatory leadership (Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

The collaborative school climate as formulated by the school principal encourages the members to communicate, coordinate, exchange views, solve problems and enhance success (Dean, 1999). The collaborative culture as demonstrated on this research leads to high levels of trust and respect among colleagues, professional satisfaction, improvement of teaching and to achievements for all members of the educational community (Waldron and McLeskey, 2010).

The research findings have also highlighted some difficulties to the application of differentiated instruction in practice, with predominantly those of the demanding Curriculum, the lack of time, of equipment support and motivation. However, one of the basic prerequisites for the application of differentiated instruction is the creation of appropriate supporting equipment for conducting activities, and this process is quite demanding and time-consuming (Christnsen, 1993; Valiandes & Koutselini, 2008).

The practical implementation of differentiated instruction discard the easy and traditional way while demands effort, dedication and patience (Valiandes & Koutselini, 2008). Leaders should not ignore their staff's motivation and encouragement; on the contrary, it is important to have the ways to make teachers feel content, pleasure, creativity and not resentment and anxiety (Kapsalis, 1996).

The research data of the present study highlighted cooperation, educational experience and communication talent as key features of the school leader's personality. The school principal is the model in the school unit for teaching, pedagogical, professional and interpersonal issues, is like an animator of all as facilitates the communication of the teaching staff with each other as well as with other institutions, instructional and pedagogical instructions to teachers and parents, and encourages them to take initiatives and make use of the skills, capabilities in order to achieve an effective teaching (Katsaros, 2008; Saitis, 2012).

The school principal's role for the successful implementation of differentiated instruction is very important (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2016). The school principal will aim at providing teachers with the necessary equipment as well as the resources to implement innovative methods. Besides the availability of supporting equipment in the classroom, the proper use of tools and materials by teachers and pupils, are useful for introducing innovations and enriching the learning process (Pasiardis & Savidis, 2016).

The present study emerges the fact that an effective school principal has to encourage the achievement of common, specific and clear goals and the ability to transmit vision to teachers. The school principal is mainly the person who will trigger a joint action, who will set clear and defined goals with the teachers in order to achieve the expected results and bring the school unit to an important factor of change in educational activities (Robinson et al., 2008).

An important finding in this research is the need to reward and recognize the value of the work done by the teachers on the part of the school principal. The evaluation of the educational work ought, or at least must not be, a means of disciplinary control and sanctions, but the result of collective responsibility, accountancy and criticism, aiming at feedback and improvement of the provided work (Konstantinou & Konstantinou, 2017: 104-112).

As a result, the need to demonstrate flexibility in the individual needs of all members of the school emerged from this study. In those cases in which the character and mission of the organization is anthropocentric, there is a risk of crowding out the 'personality' of the workers and treating them as 'Persons' in order to carry out and achieve the goals of the organization. In this case, teachers' motivation and needs are being circumvented by not being satisfied with their work (Neophytou, 2013a; 2013b). The teacher who is called upon to apply the differentiated instruction recognizes the students as autonomous personalities with their own biography (Koutselini-Ioannidou & Pyrgiotakis, 2015) respectively and the teacher should be understood as the unique and unparalleled person and recognize the needs, desires and the particular characteristics of his personality (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2015; Neophytou & Valiandes, 2016).

The formulation of the appropriate climate for the introduction of differentiation has emerged from the findings of this study. The school unit should operate in a context that fosters collaboration, mutual trust, interaction and support for change and innovation (Petrou & Angelidis, 2016).

A key finding of this research is the need to plan the work of the school leader, flexible management of time and activities according to the needs of school members. Proper management of the educational program, school actions and time are elements of effective leadership (Petrou & Angelidis, 2016).

A research's outcome presents that the teacher's role should be strengthened and that the school leadership should be given the opportunity to enhance professional development. It is important for the school principal to take the reins, the role of the mentor and to work with external actors in order to provide teachers with endoscopic training through the implementation of training actions based on the individual needs of the members and the overall profile of the school (Pashiardis, 2014; Koutselini, 2014).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study examined the degree of support provided by the school principal to teachers wishing to apply differentiated teaching. The research data of this study highlighted the adequate updating and training of teachers for the theoretical and practical implementation of the differentiated instruction, but they demonstrated its limited utilization as they mentioned as basic difficulties the lack of supporting equipment and the curriculum's demands. Finally, although research findings are limited, they are the trigger for further exploration of the issue in Greece in order to provide data that will lead to suggestions on how school principals could act positively to increase potential implementation of innovative alternative teaching methods, which will contribute dynamically to the expansion of school learning.

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