

Approaching Reflective Perspective to Contrast Risky Behaviours and Learning Issues

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Abstract

The literature of psychology of education views the environment and social factors as influential circumstances for learning, intellectual growth and human development. Considering identity and social cognition among the most sensitive elements that mark phases of cognitive, emotional and psychological development, the fact that the social factors that surround the urban and suburban areas of Tirana, the Albanian capital, are negatively conditioned by phenomena of crime, illegality, trafficking and violence, is a challenge for the role that educational institutions can play. Considering reflective practice as a contemporary additional educational method, the aim of the study is to measure the level of application of the method for the benefit of a more inclusive education for students with learning issues, who exhibit behaviours that contain risk. The question raised by the paper is: “How might concepts on ‘new insights’, ‘examining assumptions’, ‘self awareness’ and ‘critical evaluation’ redirect teaching by contextualising social issues surrounding educational institutions?” Quantitative and qualitative research methods are used with purpose of data gathering from a sample of 321 educators (n = 321), randomly selected from high schools located in the urban and suburban areas of Albanian capital. Starting from the empirical inquiry, the results gather on specific concepts of reflective practice as a component of contemporary educational methodology, which facilitates knowledge transferring, and lessens learning issues.

Keywords: identity, social cognition, risky behaviours, reflective practice in education.

1. Introduction

Although the European Commission, like other international institutions, as well civil society organizations, requires greater efforts by law enforcement structures and the government against criminality in Albania, the dangerous consequences this phenomenon has for young people are aggravated by an unprecedented spread of drug trafficking and criminal activities.

In Tirana, for schools located in high-risk areas remain a challenge adapting teaching-learning processes with educational psychology concepts on identity and social cognition.

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This paper explores the literature, where in particular that fragment of educational psychology that analyses the environment and social factors influence to learning and human development with the aim of introducing scientific concepts as a guide for a more inclusive education through reflective practice perspective.

Analysing the role of the environment and social factors in the formation of identity and social cognition, as well as considering crime as a negative and profoundly damaging circumstance around schools, the conclusions focus on the request to better understand the level of application of the reflective practice, as well reflective teaching, as a method of education that fosters inclusive learning.

1.1 Literature review

Martyn Long, Clare Wood, Karen Littleton, Terri Passenger and Kieron Sheehy (2011) state that “human development and learning take place within highly complex social and cultural structures” (Long et al., 2011). The authors refer to Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) ecological model of development and his analysis of microsystem, exosystem, mesosystem and macrosystem surrounding the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Identity formation is considered to be one of the most important elements of human development. David R. Shaffer and Katherine Kipp (2013) in their “Developmental Psychology” state that “identity formation takes quite a bit of time” (Shaffer and Kipp, 2013). Analysing the formation of identity in young people, the authors refer to Kroger (2005) and Waterman (1982), who believe that “Not until late adolescence-during the college years-do many young men and women move from the diffusion or foreclosure status into the moratorium status and proceed to achieve a sense of identity” (Kroger, 2005; Waterman, 1982). In this specific context Shaffer and Kipp (2013) analyse the environment as a truly powerful force “that can promote or inhibit intellectual growth” (Shaffer and Kipp, 2013). They also refer to Bandura (1986) and his concept of “reciprocal determinism” to describe his view that “human development reflects an interaction between an active person (P), the behaviour of the person (B) and the environment (E)” (Bandura, 1986).

Through this study, this sense of context and contextualization is analysed by the characteristics of the urban and suburban areas of Tirana, the Albanian capital, where the social factors are those surrounded by frequent criminal acts, and where a cause of strong pressure for the involvement of adolescents in baby gangs, the processes of formation of identity and social cognition risk being shaped following behaviours that contain risk, harm or danger.

Matthew Tull (2022) in analysing the concept of risky behaviour uses the words “risk-taking behaviour” (Tull, 2022) and considers it as behaviour that refers “to the tendency to engage in activities that have the potential to be harmful or dangerous” (Tull, 2022). In his analysis the author considers “trill-seeking, social influences, mental health, substance abuse” as causes for risk-taking behaviours (Tull, 2022). Furthermore, recent studies conducted in Albania from United Nations (2020), as well UNICEF in collaboration with Byrne, et. al (2021), highlight the low status of children, abuse with their rights and youth rights among

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the most sensitive social problems of youth in the country. With reference to those study and researches by various authors, who reach conclusions that empirically determine the characteristics of risky behaviours related to aggression (Kruti, 2015) or severe violence and abuse, as well exploitation and neglect (Byrne, et. al 2021), which being conditioned by high rates of crime, illegality and drug use, or trafficking, constitute a negative social circumstance for youth development.

With a view to the literature, where in particular to Jack C. Richards (2004) according to whom, the reflective teaching bases in “Reflection or ‘critical reflection’” (Richards, 2004), that according to the author “refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose” (Richards, 2004). He refers to Bartlett (1990), who considers that “becoming a reflective teacher involves moving beyond a primary concern with instructional techniques and ‘how to’ questions and asking ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions that regard instructions and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as part of broader educational purposes” (Barlett, 1990).

Focusing on a more inclusive education, following the research field of Ronualdo Marques and Claudia Regina Xavier (2021), who underlines the reflective process in education and the institutional role of the school in building inclusive education by stating that: “the school should be concerned with the cultural and scientific training of all its students and thus offer them cultural, scientific, technical, aesthetic, ethical contact, showing the concern and the development of critical thinking” (Marques and Xavier, 2021) is the main scientific domain of this research.

Demanding from the school a new contrasting approach towards risky behaviours, as well as negative environmental factors, the reflective practice, which according to Linda Finlay (2008) “carries multiple meanings that range from the idea of professionals engaging in solitary introspection to that of engaging in critical dialogue with others” (Finlay, 2008) can be considered a valuable method to facilitate the learning process and education. In her analyse Finlay refers to Zeichner and Liston (1996) who differentiate reflection during the five-level teaching process: Rapid Reflection; Repair; Revision; Research; Re-theorization and Reformulation (Zeichner and Liston, 1996). Those are concepts introduced also through this research as a conceptual guide for a new understanding and reconsideration of reflective practice, and reflective teaching, as basis for a more inclusive and effective learning and an additional method for educators to continue to play an active role in supporting students’ human development.

2. Methodology

The paper analyses the results of the study conducted in Tirana, the capital of Albania, during the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The purpose of the research is to introduce concepts of reflective practise according to scientific research, and to measure the

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level of application of the method for the benefit of a more inclusive education for students with learning issues who exhibit behaviours that contain the risk.

The question raised by the research is: “How might concepts on ‘new insights’, ‘examining assumptions’, ‘self awareness’ and ‘critical evaluation’ redirect teaching by contextualising social issues surrounding educational institutions?” At the heart of the research is the identification of the complexity of risky behaviours following the direct experience of high schools’ educators, administrators, social workers and psychologists.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods facilitated the data collection process from a sample of 321 educators (n = 321), randomly selected from high schools located in the urban and suburban areas of the Albanian capital.

Primary data is collected through questionnaires, where the first three sections are composed of closed-ended questions and the last two sections are composed of open-ended questions. Data analysis is conducted through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

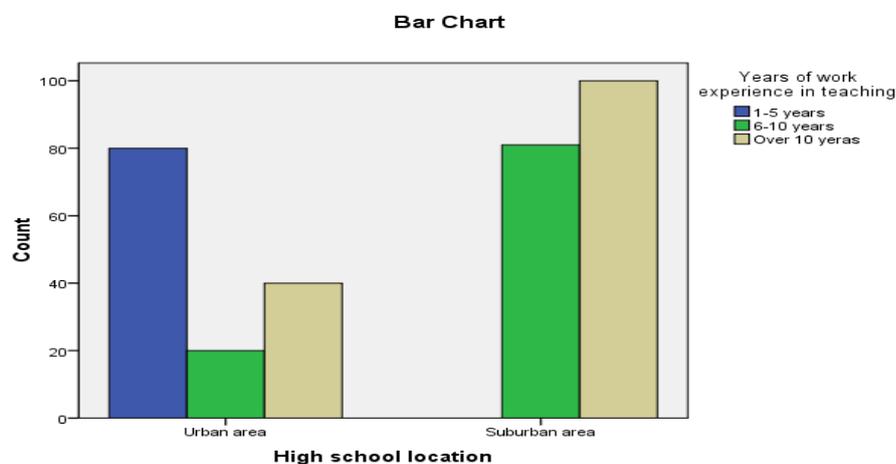
Secondary data are collected through an intensive interviewing process, in which 42 semi-structured interviews involved 22 school principals, 14 social workers and 6 psychologists.

3. Findings

Most of the data elaborated is collected by educators with over ten years of work experience in teaching (49.3%) (Figure 1). 29.5% and 21.2% of the respondents have respectively 6 to 10 years and 1 to 5 years of work experience as educators.

The high schools where the research is conducted are located within the urban (43.6%) and suburban (56.4%) areas of Tirana.

Figure 1. Descriptive data of high school location and educators’ experience in teaching



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Source: A-Institute, 2021

42.7% of respondents considered students' risky behaviours to be linked to acts of bullying. Other respondents consider fights (25.9%), injuries (18.6%) and *baby* gang recruitment (12.8%) as risky behaviours within the school environment (Table 1).

Table 1. Students' risky behaviours definition from educators

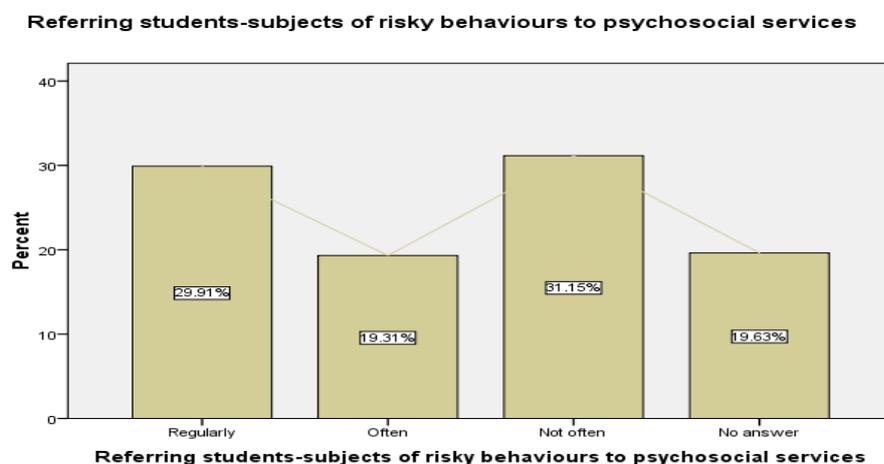
| Risky behaviour definition | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Bulling | 137 | 42.7 | 42.7 | 42.7 |
| Fights | 83 | 25.9 | 25.9 | 68.5 |
| Injuries | 60 | 18.6 | 18.6 | 87.2 |
| Baby gang recruitment | 41 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 321 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: A-Institute, 2021

Measuring the frequency of psychosocial services responses to risky behaviours, as well as understanding how educators refer students exhibiting problematic or violent behaviours to social workers or school psychologists, were part of the research objectives.

Data analysis shows that less than 30% of educators (Figure 2) regularly refer students to school psychosocial services. Comparison of questionnaires data with interviews with school administrators, social workers and psychologists underscores the concern about the very small number of psychosocial counsellors in schools. Although several high schools are located close to Tirana's suburban at-risk areas, there have been cases where respondents have turned to just one counsellor, covering psychosocial counselling in four (and more) schools.

Figure 2. Referring students-subjects of risky behaviours to psychosocial services



Source: A-Institute, 2021

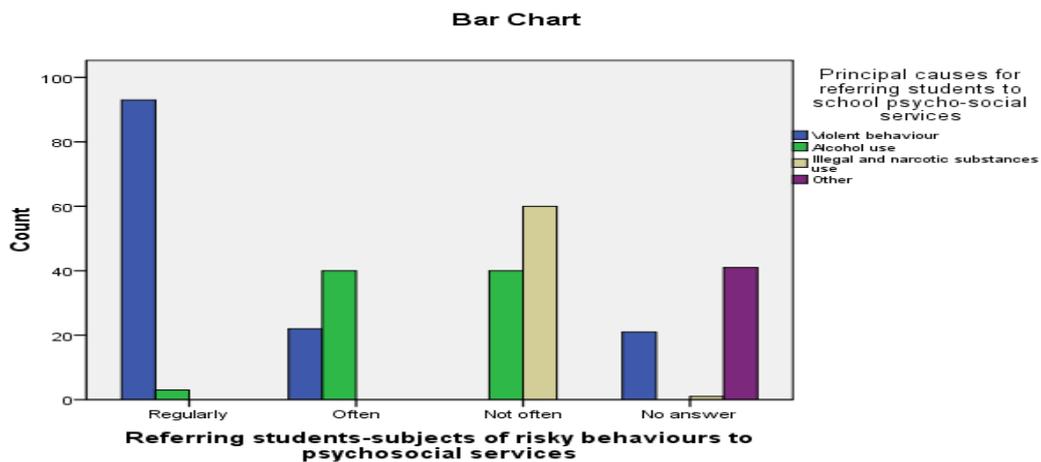
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Respondents stated that the main causes for referring students to school psychosocial services are: “Violent behaviour” (41%), “Alcohol use” (30%) and “Illegal and narcotic substances use” (29%) (Figure 3). Comparing the data with interviews with social workers and psychologists, the main psychosocial service offered to students with risky behaviours is identified as “Individual counselling”.

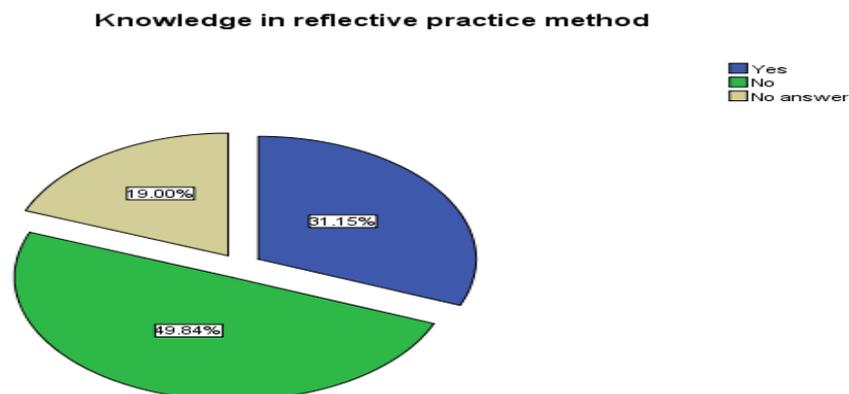
Figure 3. Comparing causes of risky behaviours with psychosocial services referring frequency



Source: A-Institute, 2021

Data analysis shows that over 68% of respondents have no knowledge on reflective practice as a method of education that facilitates learning by following different elements (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Educators’ knowledge in reflective practice



Source: A-Institute, 2021

Referring to data analysis, the educators among those teaching “Social sciences” are identified as the group of educators that have certain insights into reflective practice. Comparing data with the data elaborated from the final sections of the questionnaires the analysis shows that only 18.7% of educators elaborate teaching-learning processes following

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‘new insights’, ‘examining assumptions’, ‘self awareness’, ‘critical evaluation’ and others components of the method of reflective practice.

Carrying on analysing the primary data in a comparative view with the information gathered from the *interviews*, through the question posed in the interview guide: “Is there a form of supervision of the inclusion in the learning process of students who display violent, aggressive behaviour, who are bullies or are involved in some form of illegality?”, the majority of interviewees referred to this supervision as “*fragmented*” or “*not on a regular basis*”, while school administrators-participants in the interview process responded that this form of supervision was “*not part of their job duties*”.

When asked: “What is the institutional procedure for monitoring the progress of psychosocial counselling in the school, and who is responsible for this monitoring procedure?”, most of the interviewees indicated that “*there are procedures for monitoring the psychosocial counselling process for students*”, and that these procedures “*have an institutionally oriented hierarchy with the central level of government education institutions*”. The transcript shows that the interviewees reported no experience of being involved in psychosocial counselling monitoring processes at school.

Following the comparative analysis with primary data of the research, most of the interviewed school administrators reported that they do not have much knowledge on the method of reflective practice, but when asked: “Would you influence the introduction of reflective practice as a teaching method at school?” in majority they responded positively.

4. Discussion

Basing the research on the literature of educational psychology, and considering Bandura’s (1986) concept of “reciprocal determinism” as a link for comprehending the sense of an uninterrupted interaction between individuals and their environment, data analysis has found that although educators are aware of the profoundly damaging social factors surrounding schools, efforts to adapt teaching methodology to new models that facilitate knowledge transferring to students, without exception for individuals exhibiting bad or aggressive behaviour or that are at the borderline of danger or risk, are limited. In addition to further conceptual definitions, analysing the role of educators, Kelvin Seifert and Rosemary Sutton (2009) state that “Although the term learning has many possible meanings, the term as used by teachers emphasizes its relationship to curriculum, to teaching, and to the issues of sequencing, readiness, and transfer” (Seifert and Sutton, 2009).

The results of the study are based on the elaboration of data collected from the majority of interviewees with more than ten years of work experience as educators. Referring to literature concepts that define reflective practice, or reflective teaching, as a renewed perspective for a more inclusive learning, the data analysis shows that educators have limited knowledge of contextualizing this educational method with a direct reflection to social learning or social cognition.

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Following the literature concepts on risky behaviours as behaviours that contain risk, harm, danger, related to aggression and violence, most of respondents consider bullying acts, as well as fights within the school environment, as the most disturbing and frequent. Furthermore, a deep gap has been identified in the ability to guide teaching-learning processes following a more inclusive approach based on an effective teaching-learning methodology. The data show that just a small number of respondents know about reflective practice or reflective teaching.

The dimension of the structure through ‘new insights’, ‘examining assumptions’, ‘self awareness’, ‘critical evaluation’ is almost unknown, and there is no knowledge in the application of this structure through the re-adaptation of teaching-learning following of a more inclusive approach. These data, combined with information from interviews, show that there is a lack of monitoring of education level, attendance and achievement in students exhibiting risky behaviours, as well as monitoring of their involvement in any form of support, counselling or psychosocial aid.

5. Conclusion

Although the data analysis shows a positive relationship between the respondents’ responses and the issues identified at the beginning of this research, the generalization of the data may be taken with concern due to the moderate reaching of more educators a cause of the pandemic COVID-19.

Considering the environmental and social factors influential to behaviour, the urban and suburban areas of Tirana, dangerous, and deeply affected by criminal activities, illegal trafficking and violence, cannot be excluded from having a direct impact on identity and social cognition of the young people. Although the expectations at the beginning of the research were for an increased sensitivity on the part of educators towards these negative social factors, the data showed a kind of superficial consideration, rather a surrendering, reduced only to the concern for the students’ frequent violent behaviour.

The data showed that high school administrators and educators need more knowledge on patterns based on contemporary methodology for effective learning and civic education. Following the results of the research, this paper calls for a new contribution at the institutional and academic level, and increased efforts to detect forms and ways to restructure the role of the school in strengthening identity and social cognition, as well as for a more active role of educators, who need to find in contemporary methodology not only solutions for knowledge transferring, but also those special values necessary to promote education and human development.

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