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Towards Professional Development: Training Needs Assessment of Primary School Theater Teachers in Greece

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the professional training needs of theater educators, as they arise based on their views, who work in primary education. The fact that triggered the inception of this research was that studies concerning aesthetic education in Greece refer to all specialties (musicians, visual artists, theater educators). In some cases, research addressed in training needs that music educators or visual artist have, but not for training needs theater educators have. Consequently, the educational needs of the above specialties may converge in some areas, but, depending on the specialty, they differ in others. Additionally, until 2019, the Greek ministry of education considered the in job-training of theater educators a minor issue. For those reasons, emerged the importance of a research for the specialty of theater educators. In this context, therefore, a qualitative research was designed and conducted using a sample of thirteen theater educators, who work in primary schools in the prefecture of Heraklion, Crete. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and the results were analyzed by topic. The thematic analysis showed that there is an urgent need for training programs in certain areas.

Keywords: Training Needs, Theater Educators, Art, Theatre

1. Introduction

In our daily lives we use the word 'need', using a different meaning each time, such as necessity, desire or demand. This confusion may lead to the emergence of concepts about needs, which in economic terms, defined as supply and demand (Vergidis et al., 2010). Scriven & Roth (1990) state that a need is defined as something that can really exist and satisfy and not with something idealized or a desire. Studies concerning teachers' professional needs has been a subject for many researchers because, covering the current professional shortage reduces the gap between what one knows and what one needs to learn (Hunt, 1986 • Vergidis et al., 2010 • Kaufman & English, 1976). Goliaris (1998, as cit. In Vergidis, 2015) states that educational needs are defined as the overall teaching objects that interest a teacher. By approaching them comprehensively, a teacher will be able to improve his professional profile. In the same direction, Kapsalis and Rampidis (2006) point out that the purpose of every professional is to offer work of high social responsibility. But to achieve this, he must be able

to oversee the complex relationships and interdependencies of his professional field. Teachers, as a professional field, succeed in meeting their specific professional needs through various educational trainings. An active educator, in order to be able to meet modern demands of society, must develop both personally and professionally. The training process is an integral part of his personal and professional development.

In Greece, research results (Sfontouri, 2019 • Kotsiori, 2017 • Tsarmopoulos, 2018) showed that training needs vary, not only depending on the field and specialty, but even depending on the University of graduation, since pedagogical courses are compulsory in some university departments, but differs the content as well as the teaching method. In addition, it seems that even for teachers of the same specialty, training needs vary, depending on the elective courses offered at undergraduate level (Vergidis et al., 2010 • Kapsalis & Rampidis, 2006).

Aesthetic education is an essential part of the educational process. The school is one of the most suitable institutions for the education of students in the arts. Theatrical education, as an integral part of aesthetic education, is called to convey to students the sense of art. The quality of the theatrical education course also determines the students' interest in the art of theater. In this part a key role is played by the teacher who undertakes to teach the subject (Greenwood as cit. In Schonmann, 2011).

The role of art, and more specifically of theater in education, has been proven to be absolutely important in the educational process (Cachia & Ferrari, 2010). In the Greek educational system, this important recognition began to appear since 1990 (Sextou, 2002), a year when the introduction of specialized teachers in the field of theater began. However, despite the long-term presence of theater educators in schools, the competent hosts that undertake trainings, provide a wide range of options for key disciplines, such as that of teachers, but not for the specialty of theater educators. The present thesis aims to contribute to the investigation of this gap, seeking the training needs of theater educators who work in primary education in the prefecture of Crete in Greece.

2. Importance of teachers' training

Knowledge, especially nowadays, is produced, diffused, evolved, supplemented and replaced by a new with such a short speed that makes training an integral part of the professional and personal career of every person, every industry and every society (Pavlou, Anagnou & Fragkoulis, 2020). Vergidis et al. (2010, p.6) state that in a modern society, which is characterized by increasingly changing working conditions, the professional development of teachers is absolutely necessary. To achieve this change, teachers should be actively involved in various forms of training as well as in specific teaching activities. Teacher training is part of the educational policy for the development of lifelong learning and is therefore part of the educational change that is being undertaken.

Education, is by definition interconnected with knowledge and therefore inextricably linked to the institution of training. The rapid development of pedagogical science, the need for introduction of new approaches in the field of learning (Vallack, 2015) and the enrichment of older ones, the introduction of ICT (Giavrimis et al., 2010) and management (Anagnou, 2017) in education are a few of the reasons that make teacher training a great undertaking.

Xochelis & Papanaoum (2000, as Cit. In Kapsalis & Rampidis, 2006) state that in order for a teacher to be able to develop, both professionally and personally and to be competitive in modern requirements, he must participate in an ongoing training process. The duration should start from his entry into the profession and reach the end of his professional career.

3. Importance of aesthetic education

Increasingly in recent years, formal education programs in many countries have begun to place more emphasis on the role of art in education. As mentioned by Weitz (1972), art and education are bridged through the concept of aesthetic education. Its benefits, are widely recognized. The role of arts in the process of education is an

important qualitative renewal, as critical thinking, creativity, social, aesthetic and emotional cultivation of young people develop. The importance of art in education, both for teachers and students, reflected in research by Weitz (1972), Schonmann (2006) and Calderhead & Shorrock, (2005). When teachers know and recognize the important role of art as an educational tool, they contribute through it to the overall development of the child, which is achieved both with his mind and with his sensory-motor means.

In the Greek educational system, the subject of aesthetic education entered in 1990, when significant changes were made in educational policy concerning the curriculum of primary and secondary education. Despite the efforts of the Greek educational system, which aimed at the development of arts in education, there is still a long way to go in this direction. As early as 2002, Sextou (2002) had made reference to the importance of integrating the subject of aesthetic education in schools and its teaching by properly trained teachers. In 2015, thirteen years after the first suggestion for specially trained educators in the field of aesthetic education, the research of Zorbala et al (2015) showed that, even from universities, prospective teachers are not trained in the effective use of art in order to apply it as an educational tool.

4. Theater in education

In school environment, the art of theater has correspondingly deep roots. In particular, Bolton (1985) states that in the United Kingdom, the first to introduce theater into the classroom through theatrical play was Peter Slade in the 1930s and 1940s. Slade, although originally intended theatre to serve as an auxiliary tool in the hands of teachers, eventually became widely accepted as a good teaching practice.

Although Slade presents himself as a pioneer in this field, the one who established the method of teaching theater in education is Brian Way. Initially embracing Slade's philosophy, he later introduced techniques from Stanislavski's method. This change in the process of teaching theater in education has given teachers greater confidence in how they can manage theater as an educational tool. O'Toole (2005) states that the drama in education depends to a large extent on the respective group of students who take part in it and the external conditions that take place at the given time in the given space. Control in these conditions is limited, and consequently participants have to constantly renegotiate how they can manage and manifest the basic elements of the dramatic form. Therefore, drama in education is an ongoing process.

Bolton (1985) states that when students relate to drama, they certainly learn something. Wright (2014) agrees, adding that when drama is effective, then it becomes an educational tool. Theater in education has a multiple role. It is a communicative, creative, collective and artistic activity. Its purpose is to help students understand the social relationships that develop inside and outside the school, to socialize and be able to integrate into the wider society (Grammatas, 2001).

4.1 Theater in Greek educational curriculum

Theater as a separate subject was introduced in the Greek curriculum in 1990 (Grammatas, 2001 • Sextou, 2002). Prior to 1990, there was no official guide on how theater could be implemented in schools. General education teachers applied theater techniques based on their own knowledge, mood and experience.

The subject of theater in the Greek educational system, has no specific educational target. The course is not aimed at a predetermined correct or desired attitude, ability or knowledge. An experiential awareness is attempted in order to develop a personal attitude towards issues that each person faces as a member of a team. This experiential character aims at cultivating the expression and familiarization of the student with the theatrical act.

Theater in the Greek curriculum extends from Kindergarten to High School. The need to introduce the subject in the pre-school and in the first school phase of education arises from the indisputable fact that theatrical education contributes - as an activity and as a teaching methodology - to the better preparation of children for their integration into the pedagogical system and to the acquisition of better relations with themselves and others.

During the drafting of the detailed study guide for educators. Every effort has been made to ensure that the course combines knowledge, creation and expression in a balanced way. Regarding the structure, the spiral evolution of the contents leads from simple to complex activities and from practical to theoretical approaches.

In particular, the following is sought:

- The development of the personality, the aesthetic cultivation, the freedom of expression, the self-knowledge and the mutual respect of the students within the school team.
- The acquisition by students of that knowledge that will help them to understand, recruit and evaluate the theatrical event, and to transform their knowledge and experience.
- The creative contact of the students with the art of theatre both through the dramatic texts and through their stage expression, with the ultimate goal of expanding their studies in the cultural field.
- The enrichment of the teaching methods with the principles and techniques of the theatre (dramatization, etc.) and therefore the improvement of the teaching program as a whole. (www.pi-schools.gr)

5. Method

The data collection method was qualitative. The decisive factor was the harmonization of the method with the research question.

The research question was: What are the theater educators' training needs, according to their views?

The purpose of the research was to investigate and understand a central theme through a detailed description (Creswell, 2016; Bell, 2005; Robson, 2010). The research used a case study, since it concerns the theater educators of a particular prefecture, that of primary schools of Heraklion Crete during the school years 2019-2020. This strategy was chosen because the research aims at a deeper understanding and interpretation of personal perceptions and experiences of participants about the type and preferences regarding their professional development.

The data production and collection technique was the personal semi-structured interview. Such tool enables the sequence of questions to be modified (Bell, 2001), there is great adaptability, as the interviewer can add ideas at any point, explore deeper motivations and views. Also, there is room to clarify the answers of the respondents and there is better control of the interviewer over the information he will receive since he can ask specific questions (Robson, 2010; Creswell, 2016; Bell, 2005).Therefore, this tool has been chosen as the most appropriate to highlight the views of the participants.

5.1 Participant Characteristics

The participants of the research (convenience sampling) were 13 theater educators working in primary schools in Heraklion Crete during 2019-2020. As for gender, 3 educators were men and 10 women. The average age of the participants was 33 years and the average working experience was 8 years. Ten of them have participated in training programs, either on the subject they teach or on something different, but always in relation to their educational activity. Undoubtedly, the participants in this survey do not represent the entire population of theater educators in Greece, and consequently, the research results are not generalizable.

5.2 Data analysis method

Thematic categorization was used as a procedure for analysis of data collected from the interviews. In thematic analysis, the focus is on concepts, meanings or themes, which refer to the phenomenon under study and how it is perceived by the participants in the research. Boyatzis (1998) summarizes the thematic analysis in four stages. Clarke, Braun & Hayfield (2006, Cit. In Smith, 2015) are in the same direction, but adding important details on thematic analysis. In the present work, the choice of descriptive thematic analysis was considered the best

choice, as data resulting from the interview information do not need deeper analysis. Several testimonies were added from the information given by the participants in the final report to confirm the data.

6. Results

A general reading of the interviews was initially done, in order to highlight the thematic categories. The interviews were then divided into sections according to their content and specific headings were given. This was followed by the creation of a list of coded titles and the identification of overlaps in the coding. The final codes were collected and thus four general categories emerged. These were identified according to the answers of the teachers who participated in the interviews and based on the purpose and questions posed in the research.

At the stage of information analysis, four thematic topics were selected and used. First topic was the academic background in order to investigate if theater educators feel well trained from their universities. Second topic was the professional experience in order to obtain information about difficulties they meet in their profession. Third topic was the training needs theatre educator mention and the last topic was the participants' training preferences The present paper focuses on the training needs that theater educators mention they have.

6.1 Training needs

Theater educators' training preferences were expressed by answering questions about the content of training, host implementing the training, appropriate time to attend a training, form of training (live, distance or mixed) and appropriate time to complete a training cycle.

The largest number of participants revealed that the most basic way for a theatre educator to improve his role in the modern school environment is that of participation in seminars and trainings, continuous effort of self-improvement through internet technology and theatrical developments.

Theater educators also, emphasize on the lack of information they have about training programs. The main way to be informed about training programs is through the internet, discussions with colleagues and via relevant posts on the page of Scientific Association of Theater educators (PESYTH).

In order to attend a program, theater educators seem to place personal interest and content as key factors. Most of the participants revealed that they choose the training based on their own interests. They also try to choose from the offered training programs, first those that are directly related to their profession and then programs with different topics.

The main expectation from their participation in training programs is acquisition of new knowledge. In this way they will optimize their educational process, which implies personal professional development.

6.1.1 Content of the training programs

When asked about the content of a training program, theater educators referred both to practical and theoretical issues. Regarding the practical content of a training, it seems that the participants prefer practical tips for classroom management, ideas for new theater games, practical tips for managing students with special educational needs, teaching theater via technology and, finally, lesson plans.

...the theoretical part should focus on managing in-school problems through theatrical education, on child and adolescent psychology and on ways of communicating with specific cases of parents. Cases of abuse, domestic violence, etc.... The practical has to do both with innovative theatrical games in the field of theatrical education, and how we can deal with special cases practically, through a game. (I2)

...practices on how to teach theatrical play, creative ideas...how to deal with some difficulties in the classroom. (I6)

We have flexibility in the material we can use and in the curriculum. I can achieve the same goal through different methods, or different types of theater. So a variety would be, to know how puppet theater works and how black theater works and how new technologies in theatre works. (I11)

The content I would like to have some lesson plans. Because in 45 minutes you have to fit everything. This always makes it difficult for me. (I12)

Regarding the theoretical content of a training program, it seems that psychology related issues are preferred according to participants. In 7 of the 13 interviews, participants preferred a training to include effective ways to communicate with both students and students' parents, as well as developmental issues.

I would like better a training in psychology and problem management in pre-adolescence students because now children go into pre-adolescence from the fourth grade. And I would also like a special seminar that has to do with building relationships with parents, and how it can be built even though you are a theatre educator and not α general education teacher. (I2)

...I think lessons that have to do with psychology, these are something that would interest me and I would attend it with great pleasure. (I4)

Maybe matters of psychological nature for children... how to say ehm...developmental. To learn a little about how children develop so that we can better contribute to their psychology. I think that is missing. (I9)

6.1.2 Host implementing training

Regarding the appropriate host for the implementation of training programs, most of the participants state that it should be public. In this way, they believe, that it will be possible for all theater educators to participate without any financial cost.

First of all, definitely without any cost. It should be organized from the ministry and in-school, i.e. as usually trainings are done for other teachers. (I7)

I think the Ministry. Yes, because it is something objective, something that is offered to everyone. Because I may have to give money to go to Athens to attend a training program. But if a colleague can't afford to participate in a training program, the ministry must provide all the means, to train him or her. Yes this is a work entirely up to the ministry. (I11)

However, in the answers given by the participants, it seems that although a public host is the most appropriate, they do not exclude a private, as well as a mixed model of the two. More specifically, in 4 interviews a private host is mentioned as suitable for training theater educators.

...since we are talking about a public school, definitely a public host. But a private host also, why not. Of course for teachers it should be free. (I8)

Interviewees mention for a mixed model, that the private host should be completely relevant to the profession of theater educators and to theater in general.

I think it would be the Panhellenic Scientific Association of Theater educators. A fairly suitable host. In collaboration, however, with a legally established association of drama therapists. (I2)

Nice question...Obviously the experts of theater or experts on theatrical games. A mixed model of private and public host. But surely a private host could help more. (I9)

6.1.3 Appropriate time to attend a training

The most appropriate time for the implementation of a training program was captured by the participants with quite interesting variation. Data obtained show a preference for the implementation of in-school training during morning hours. More specifically, 7 participants report the above preference because it harmonizes with trainings attended by general teachers. There are, however, 3 participants who think that ideally trainings should be done overtime. They mention that there is obviously much more free time.

At school time. Because it is considered in-school training. I think it is perfectly productive to do it in the afternoon, but I do not think it is right since the legal framework says that everyone else (general teachers) gets trainings from 8:00 to 13:00. If everyone else does training in the afternoon I will be happy to do it in the afternoon too. (I2)

Okay, it should definitely be off-schedule and I would say maybe weekend. Yes, days that are generally more relaxed for all people. (I3)

Finally, afternoons, either on weekends or daily, are reported as the preferred time by 6 participants. This time is mentioned as ideal since everyone will be able to participate.

I think morning hours or something that starts Friday afternoon to Saturday or Sunday morning is something that is accessible to everyone or at least to most. (I4)

6.1.4 Form of training

Regarding the form that a training program should ideally have for theater educators, this is the way of physical presence. Nearly all the interviewees prefer to participate in various programs with physical presence in workshops and experiential exercises. On the other hand, none of the participants showed interest in training, purely from distance.

...I would prefer the seminar to be experiential, not theoretical. (I6)

...not in the same way that they are done for (general) teachers...our lesson has a different nature, it cannot remain in a theoretical context. I mean that for us it would be better experiential trainings. Okay theory is good but it is better when you have learned something first hand you have. (I8)

However, 2 of interviewees prefer a mixed model of training programs. A model that participants will be able to attend its content live and from distance. They emphasize that, in this way, everyone will be able to participate without having to move to another city or even another prefecture.

...to create a public organization or company of theater educators who will organize training seminars that will be accessible to all via internet due to the long distance. (I4)

...in all ways. And via internet. And physical presence. Via internet it would be useful. For those in remote areas. (I9)

6.1.5 Appropriate time to complete a training cycle

Regarding time that it takes to successfully complete a training program, participants gave a fairly wide range of answers. The minimum duration is 2 to 3 months and certainly not just a few days. The duration of two or three months offers confidence in the successful acquisition of new knowledge.

Certainly we should not talk about one-week or three-day seminars. It should be an ongoing training maybe two or three weekends a month for two months or at least something more. To be continuous, not to be a fragmentary event. (I4)

... I do not know...basically depending on what one wants to learn. If it's something I do not know I could stay in training, let's say 2 or 3 months maybe all year, depending, I do not know. It depends who will do it and what it will have as content. (I8)

On the contrary, the maximum ideal duration for a training program is 2 to 3 years.

...Difficult question because, as we know, most seminars are done now in half and a year. I would say that, ideal training should be time consuming like 2 or 3 years. But without, of course, having daily lessons. It should have more sparse lessons but longer duration per lesson. In order to have, between lessons, time to immerse in what you meet there in each session. (I3)

An important element of the answers is that all participants believe that the training process should be ongoing. Periodicity is also considered a necessary factor in programs because with this way they will be able, as mentioned, not only to attend or participate, but also to assimilate what they learn effectively.

We would gather, once in three months, to exchange views and problems so that there is feedback until the next time. So questions will be created and then answered, there should be a continuum on a training program. (I7)

7. Discussion-Conclusions

The importance of theater in education and the role of the teacher were presented in the literature review. Theater educators are required to be both scientists and educators. To be able to respond, their training is needed more than ever. This research focuses on whether theatrical teachers have the appropriate resources to cope with an ever-changing society but also with the growing professional needs of the modern school. The conclusions of the present study, however, cannot be generalized, due to the methodological approach chosen.

As Dewey (1986) points out, engaging in the art of theater is essentially experiential. The nature of the theatrical lesson is similar and thus unleashes creativity. So, the practical part of a training that theater educators mention is the one that will give them the necessary supplies. This aspect highlighted by the research of Flynn & Carr (1994) in which, they point out that using theater can enrich teachers' educational tools. The way, however, and the means should be well chosen, and in any case teachers should have the right direction from experts.

In terms of content, the critical issue of classroom management is in their first choices along with the management of students with special educational needs. Theater educators focus on psychology, effective communication, and developmental issues. It seems that a training program should not have a one-sided orientation but take into account the needs of teachers. As Gokmenoglu et al (2016) report, diversity, multiplicity and flexible forms are more effective in training programs.

Eight of the participants stated that they had participated in a training program in general, two of which answered that it did not help them at all while the other six answered that with what they learned in the program they enriched their knowledge. A training in the use of drama for educational purposes affects the professional development of teachers. This finding seems to agree with the research of Alexiou & Zourna (2016) which showed that training on the exploitation of drama as an educational tool worked positively, pushing teachers to take on more responsibilities and to participate in additional training programs concerning the subject.

As for the implementing host of training programs, the highest position is held by the public so that all theatre educators can participate without personal financial cost. A private host is preferred by the participants in cases where it is directly related to their interests, but also when there is no other solution.

For most participants a training, ideally, should take place during working hours. Lifelong learning is the basic preferred form for theater educators due to the experiential nature of the course. However, there are cases in which theater educators have expressed their preference for a mixed training model. The multifaceted role of the mixed learning mode is described in detail by Bonk & Graham (2006). As educational techniques and

technology evolve and progress the same should happen with training programs. The important contribution of the mixed training model is also presented in Greece. Research has shown that the largest percentage of teachers consider the mixed model to be a more efficient form of training (Vergidis, Anagnou, & Karantzis, 2010). Whatever the form, however, the training should reach the desired goal, development. This point of view underlined how important it is for a theater educator to participate in training programs even when he/she is far from the basic training centers. According to the participants, many of the theater educators do not have the opportunity to take part when serving in schools located outside the major cities where seminars and trainings take place. So distance participation can meet their educational needs.

Finally, regarding the duration a training program should have in order to be complete, the answers given, vary from two months to three years. What the participants agree on is that every training process should have an ongoing character, in order for the assimilation of new knowledge to be effective. This finding agrees with Jacob & Lefgren (2002) who state that the time dedicated to a training program is one of the determining factors for desired educational results.

Overall, we would say that theatrical education is a basically experiential lesson, which contributes to the comprehensive educational process. Teaching this subject by properly trained teachers improves students' abilities in such a way that they develop better relationships not only with themselves but also with all the people they meet. The profession of theater educator emerges as a valuable aid of education. Therefore their professional development should be in line with that of other teachers. For this reason, more emphasis should be placed on the educational needs that theater educators have and want to meet.

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