Leadership styles in special education

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Abstract: *This study focuses on the exploration of leadership styles adopted by principals of special schools. Moreover, the study examines -in association with the leadership style- the degree of teachers' job satisfaction, as well as the extent to which the selection criteria for school principals are appropriate for the special education sector. In addition, the study aims to explore the possible relationship between the leadership style adopted by school principals and the level of teachers' job satisfaction. Towards this scientific purpose a qualitative research was administeted, among 69 teachers who work in special schools in Northern Greece. Findings indicated that transformational leadership is the basis upon significant educational and organization issues should be addressed.*

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1   INTRODUCTION

In an era where challenges and changes at the political, social and economic level are taking place, schools are required to carry out their mission. It is obvious that the role of the school principal is becoming increasingly demanding and multidimensional. School principals are called upon to respond to the growing diversity of students' characteristics, including their cultural background, economic background and income inequalities, the diversity that migration inevitably brings about as a situation, as well as the physical, mental disabilities or learning disabilities that some students may face. Principals, however, have to respond to the challenges of the new era and serve students' needs despite the fact that educational environments are becoming more and more complicated. Principals acting as school leaders, along with the teaching staff, are called upon to make many changes, both substantive and transformative, while working together to develop mutual goals that contribute to the composition of the common purpose (Rost, 1991).

The key elements of school leadership focus on school guidance, human development as well as the development of the organization, as the main functions of school leadership are influence and guidance provision (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The field of special education, however, has a

particular tradition that leads teachers to use a particular way in their work (Ainscow, 2002). Consequently, leadership in special education has certain characteristics that differentiate it from leadership in typical education, as diversity which is the second nature of special education, differentiates the content of leadership (Rayner & Ribbins, 1999).

The general purpose of this study is to explore the leadership styles adopted by the principals of special schools. The particular interest of this study focuses on the leadership style that is most appropriate for special schools. In addition, the purpose of this study is to examine the suitability of selection criteria for school principals in special education. Finally, the pursuit of this study is to determine the level of job satisfaction regarding teachers who work in the special education sector and to examine the possibility of a correlation between teachers' job satisfaction and the leadership style adopted by school principals in special education.

2   THEORETICAL FRAMEFORK

Research on leadership in special education units is limited not only in Greece but globally. This results in a lack of bibliography which has a direct impact on our knowledge in this field at a time when education is being restructured, and both the duties of education professionals and the professional relationships are changing (Powers, Rayner, & Gunter, 2001).

The lack of knowledge on leadership in special education is not only a result of limited available research but also a result of the limitations and barriers that emerge in special education which an education professional has to face. According to Rayner and Ribbins (1999), leadership in special education has certain characteristics that make it different from general leadership issues, as the diversity that is inherent in the nature of special education differentiates the content of leadership. The researchers point out that people who lead a special school have to invest in their relationships and personal development and improvement. They also have to keep a positive attitude about the value of education of children with disabilities even those who are less able to acquire academic knowledge.

In addition, the development of school culture contributes to the acceptance of the adjustments that lead to the evolution of school communities. From this side of view, leadership seems to play an important role. Taking on responsibilities and teamwork as well as the creation of a vision are the key elements in successfully managing adaptations so that special schools are able to develop new roles (Atfield & Williams, 2003). At the same time, encouraging parents to instill the values of education in their children can contribute to the development of the families' school culture. This will result in the development of students' school culture. Therefore, one way to increase the influence of school leadership in order to improve school outcomes is to focus on initiatives aimed at systematically enhancing each family's school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999).

According to Ainscow (2002), the field of special education has a special tradition that drives its education professionals to use a particular way in their work. In fact, special education operates in a problem-solving culture in which everyone involved learns to use each other's resources and experiences to devise better ways to overcome the barriers that emerge.

It is obvious that the way a school principal treats and manages the teaching staff has a great influence on the ability of teachers to participate in a process of attitude change regarding inclusive education practices. Inadequate communication between the principal and the teaching staff, combined with insufficient time to develop mentoring roles in the school, can result in teachers who are unwilling to cooperate and, as a result, can create an environment in which it is hard to make any changes (Wlodarczyk, Somma, Bennett, & Gallagher, 2015).

Haning a good climate at the administrative level fosters a positive school culture that supports students' learning needs. Educational leaders who support and encourage teachers to positive change develop relationships with their staff, provide opportunities for growth at both professional and personal level, and ultimately realize that their policies are more easily accepted within a supportive environment (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

3   LEADERSHIP STYLES

Leadership style is a set of behaviors that the leader exhibits in relation to other team members. Taking into account the degree to which team members are involved in the decision-making process, Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939) defined three major leadership styles of behavior: autocratic, liberal and democratic.

The autocratic leadership style often contradicts the democratic style. According to Bass (1990), the autocratic leader makes decisions without consultation and focuses on structure and performance. Autocratic leadership results in a low level of morale and satisfaction among team members, while contributing to the development of a high degree of stress. Bass (1990) also questions whether autocratic leadership can enhance productivity because the limitations of focus and the lack of flexibility that characterize autocratic leadership lead to the inability to create a sense of satisfaction or commitment among team members.

The leader who adopts the liberal leadership style defines the mission of the organization. The leader sets broad limits, and expects from team members to vigorously strive to complete the mission. Team members, however, have a great deal of flexibility. This framework is characterized by high levels of trust on the part of the leader who distributes power by delegating responsibilities to lower level executives (Dyer, 1986).

The liberal leadership style allows freedom of choice in the decision-making process. Bass (1990) notes that adopting liberal style results in low levels of organization, efficiency productivity, as well as morale and satisfaction among team members.

On the other hand, the democratic leadership style favors building understanding and coherent teamwork. It increases the satisfaction of the team members, contributes to conflict resolution and improves the quality of decisions and their acceptance. It also contributes to the development of

leadership and decision-making skills (Bass, 1990). Adopting the democratic style, the leader chooses to involve team members in the decision-making process and direction of the organization. According to Sorenson (2000), the level of participation may vary in each case. The participation can range from gathering information and submitting opinions to joint decision-making and delegation of tasks (Sorenson, 2000).

Research on the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction and their involvement in the decision-making process has shown that the greater the teachers' involvement in the decision-making process, the higher their job satisfaction (Rice & Schneider, 1994). When maintaining an open climate where principals adopt the democratic leadership style and maintain open channels of communication with the staff, teachers are more satisfied with their work than working in schools where principals display a tougher and autocratic attitude (Kottkamp, Mulhern, & Hoy, 1987).

On the other hand, according to Bogler (2001), in order to improve the sensation of teachers in schools, principals need to be aware of the impact their role and behavior have on teachers' satisfaction. By adopting the democratic leadership style, principals have the opportunity to develop and reinforce teachers' positive feelings about their mission. Teachers' job satisfaction contributes to improving their relationship with their students and enhancing their enthusiasm for their work (Bogler, 2001).

In addition, Komorita and Parks (1994) emphasize that in order to maintain a team's viability, the leader must ensure that the team members are sufficiently committed so as to remain in the team. At this point, the leadership style adopted by the leader is important. Open, democratic leaders who actively involve group members in the decision-making process are more likely to keep their members engaged than offish, autocratic leaders. Team members may be less committed to an autocratic leader because such leaders do not give the opportunity for many potential options (Komorita & Parks, 1994).

4   METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The questionnaires used for the purpose of this study consist of closed-ended questions. Most of the questions use the Likert scale, which is a scale that indicates the degree of agreement of the research participants with a specific position. This position is expressed in the form of an affirmative proposal and participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with that proposal. The Likert scale is preferable to have an odd number of options, which are usually five. The reason is that if the number of options available is not an odd number, it does not allow the respondent to choose the "middle" option, leading him indirectly to take a position. This study largely adopted the five-point Likert scale. A small number of closed-ended multiple-choice questions were also included, mainly used for recording demographics.

The questionnaire used for conducting this research consists of four parts. The first part consists of 13 questions, using the Likert scale, aimed at identifying the expected leadership style adopted by principals in special education. In the second part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to answer 11 questions using the Likert scale, in order to determine the level of job satisfaction of teachers who work in special education. This is followed by the third part of the questionnaire consisting of 7 questions that negotiate the degree of appropriateness of school principals' selection criteria, five of which use the Likert scale and two use the multiple choice scale. Finally, the fourth and final part consists of 4 closed-ended questions that refer to demographics.

The sample of the research consists of 69 teachers who work exclusively in special schools, as the purpose of the research is to investigate teachers' views on the leadership style adopted by school principals in special education. The sample of this study consists of teachers working in 5 special schools located in Aridea, Giannitsa, Naousa, Florina and Kavala.

5   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate, similar to Bogler's (2001) research, that teachers who work in special schools prefer to work with a principal who adopts the transformational leadership style, who maximizes the teachers' sense of autonomy, has a vision for the future and constitutes a source of inspiration (Bogler, 2001). In addition, the results of this study indicate that teachers favor a democratic leadership style that contributes to building a positive climate, understanding and coherent teamwork (Bass, 1990).

Teachers also state in their overwhelming majority that the primary role of a principal is to meet the requirements of the school which has specific features compared to typical schools. These specific features are concerned with the safety of students who face various difficulties, such as the accessibility issues. Teachers also point out that the principal has to effectively respond to their needs related to their duties at school.

According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), one of the main common characteristics of principals who adopt the transformational leadership style is the provision of personalized support to the teaching staff. Bass and Avolio (1990) also note that transformational leadership focuses on the leader's interest in the group members.

Moreover, according to the teachers, the principal is instrumental to increasing their desire to try more. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) consider that the adoption of the transformational leadership style by school principals contributes to teachers' willingness to make more of an effort. Furthermore, teachers do not believe that school principals should act in accordance with their own beliefs. This contradicts what the autocratic leadership style advocates, in which leaders enforce their decisions with the authority given to them by their work position, without taking into account the views of their teaching staff (Bass, 1990). Finally, teachers believe that the school principals have to make clear who is responsible for achieving specific goals.

Concerning the level of job satisfaction, the results show that teachers who work in special schools are quite satisfied with

the tasks they have undertaken in their school. They also state that they receive the recognition they deserve when doing their job at school properly. Additionally, teachers characterize the level of communication in the school as "good enough". On the other hand, teachers do not believe that their school principal is unjust, and they do not feel that he or she does not care about their emotions. Indeed, when communication is maintained at a good level, when there is a sense of law, when there is an interest taken in teachers by their principals, when teachers are happy with the tasks assigned to them, then the teachers feel more satisfied with their work (Kottkamp, Mulhern, & Hoy, 1987).

Concerning the criteria for selecting principals, teachers working in special schools consider that training on school leadership and management issues is a key factor for the successful performance of the principal's duties. In fact, teachers believe that the principals, after being selected, should attend training programs on school organization and management. Indeed, a prerequisite for ensuring the proper functioning of schools is that the principal possesses the skills related to the decision-making process. Therefore, the involvement of school principals in training programs aimed at developing these skills is imperative. Moreover, according to Rayner, Gunter, and Powers (2002), professional development and training are necessary prerequisites for issues concerning schools and education executives.

In addition, there is a consensus among teachers that a candidate's qualifications, as regards to the units concerning organization and management, should be the primary criterion in their selection process for the post of school principal. At the same time, Rayner, Gunter, and Powers (2002) emphasize that both locally-based training and long-term professional development through postgraduate studies strengthen the staff of special schools in their work.

In addition, teachers do not seem to trust personal interviewing as a criterion in the process of selecting school principals, despite the fact that according to Law 4547/2018 the interview is recorded in order to ensure the transparency of the process. Teachers, therefore, appear wary of personal interviewing as a criterion for selecting principals.

From the correlations that emerged from the statistical analysis of the research data, it is found that when the school principal adopts the transformational leadership model as well as the democratic leadership style, then teachers' job satisfaction is enhanced. According to Bogler (2001), teachers' job satisfaction contributes to improving the relationship with their students and enhancing their enthusiasm for their workplace. All the above are key factors that contribute to the proper functioning of the school.

According to the analysis of the teachers' responses, when the principal looks for different perspectives, emphasizes the collective sense of mission and collaborates with the teaching staff, then teachers get a sense of satisfaction. Indeed, when principals maintain an open climate and open channels of communication with the teaching staff adopting a democratic leadership style, teachers appear to be more satisfied (Kottkamp, Mulhern, & Hoy, 1987). On the other hand, the autocratic leadership style results in low levels of morale and satisfaction among team members while contributing to the development of high levels of stress (Bass, 1990).

Additionally, the data analysis shows that when the principal emphasizes the collective sense of mission, then communication is good and disputes and conflicts are less. According to Bass (1990), a sense of cooperation builds understanding, increases satisfaction among team members, contributes to conflict resolution, and improves the quality of decisions and their acceptance. It also contributes to the development of leadership traits as well as the skills necessary for the decision-making process (Bass, 1990). According to Leithwood, Riedlinger, Bauer, and Jantzi (2003), in and out of the classroom, the roles of school teachers, both individually and as members of the professional community, are key factors affecting the proper functioning of the school.

In addition, research shows that when the principal has a vision for the future, responds to the needs of teachers and reinforces their desire to strive more, then communication at school is at a good level and teachers get a sense of satisfaction. According to Bass and Avolio (1990), the transformational leader is a source of inspiration to his colleagues, focuses on them, and motivates them to find ways to solve the problems that arise. Thus, the organization works more effectively. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) conclude that principals who adopt the transformational leadership style find greater willingness on the part of teachers to make more of an effort, which even refers to changes in teaching practices and behaviors.

6   SUMMARY

At a time when technological, political, social and economic changes and transitions are taking place, schools are called upon to function with the aim of "the comprehensive, harmonious and balanced development of students' mental and psysical powers", as referred to in Article 16 of the Greek Constitution. In order to achieve their goal, schools are required to make effective use of available human and material resources. As a result, both the role of teachers and the role of school leaders are changing, demands are increasing, and education executives are called upon to tackle new challenges.

The school principals must have organizational and administrative skills as well as coordination skills. They have to set goals and utilize human and material resources. The principals are called upon to coordinate, guide and motivate teachers in order to ensure the proper functioning of the school. The school principals are also called upon to be the connecting link of the school they lead with the local community. It is evident that the role of the school leader is multidimensional, while at the same time the school leadership is influencing school's effectiveness.

In education, but even more so in the delicate area of special education, the stability of the system as well as of the individuals are important factors for a continuum to achieve better learning outcomes. However, staffing the special schools mostly with temporarily placed teachers is not conducive to creating a stable environment for the pupils. Consequently, there are educational policy issues that need to be addressed at a central level to create the conditions to

enhance the quality of education in special schools as well as in public schools in general.

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