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Training Needs of Primary School Theater Teachers:

A Greek Case Study

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Abstract

Aim of this paper is to investigate the training needs of theater educators 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). Consequently, the educational needs of the above specialties may converge in some areas, but, depending on the specialty, they differ in others. Additionally, the in-job-training of theater educators has been at least a minor issue. For this reason, it was considered important to study more specifically 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: Theatrical Educators, Professional Development, Education, Training

1. Introduction

The rapid development in social, political, economic, cultural and scientific level, create a new reality in the field of education (Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2017; Wee, 2009). The personal and professional development of a teacher is an important factor for the upgrading of education while its role has been recognized internationally because it affects the effectiveness in the educational process (Kapsalis & Rampidis, 2006; Dawson et al, 2014; Roland, 2010). This new reality creates an even more intense need for training and professional development of the teachers, in order to be able to cope with their difficult task.

The role of art, and 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 from 1990 (Sextou, 2002), a year when the introduction of specialized teachers in the field of theater

initiated. However, despite the long-term presence of theater educators in schools, the competent carriers that undertake the training programs, provide a wide range of options for teachers, but not for the specialty of theater educators.

2. The importance of teachers' professional development and improvement

Nowadays, knowledge is produced, diffused, evolved, supplemented and replaced by another with such a speed that makes training an integral part of the professional and personal career of every person, every industry and every society.

Having knowledge of the real needs of the staff in an organization or in a professional field, training programs can be organized with targeted educational strategies, improving the professional performance. The most effective improvement of a current performance or the correction of a deficiency in the knowledge or skills of the workforce is achieved when five key questions have been answered. These are: why should a training program be done, who is involved in the training, how can a lack of training improve, what is the best way to achieve our goal and finally, what is the best time to conduct the training program (Moore & Dutton, 1978; Gould et al., 2004; Barbazette, 2006).

Education, is by definition interrelated 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.

In Greece, research results (Sfontouris, 2019; Kotsioris, 2017; Tsarmopoulos, 2018) showed that training needs vary not only depending on the field and specialty, but even depending on the University someone graduated. Moreover, it seems that even for teachers of the same specialty, the training needs differ depending on the elective courses offered at the undergraduate level (Vergidis et al., 2010; Kapsalis & Rampidis, 2006).

Given the above, training is called to play a very important role, as teachers must be supported and clearly participate actively in the educational and social changes they are experiencing, so that they are able to meet the needs of the time, to understand student and school needs and take initiatives. (Katsimbras & Gelameris, 2018).

3. Aesthetic education

The past few years many 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 and its benefits are widely recognized.

The role of arts in the process of education is an important qualitative renewal, because it develops critical thinking, creativity, social, aesthetic and emotional cultivation of young people (Schonmann, 2006; Calderhead & Shorrock, 2005). Flannery (1973) emphasizes that a person, in order to be complete, must develop values of life so that he is not alienated from the human side and art is a means to succeed.

In the Greek educational system, the subject of aesthetic education entered the curriculum of primary and secondary education, since 1990 due to changes in educational policy. The reason, however, for the introduction of these courses in the school curriculum, was an ambitious training program entitled "MELINA". The multiple benefits of the program gave a new impetus to the didactic objects of music, visual arts and theatrical education (Vergidis & Tourkaki, 2005). Despite the efforts of the Greek educational system for the development of the arts in education, there is still a long way to go towards this direction. As early as 2002, Sextou (2002) had referred to the importance of integrating the subject of aesthetic education in schools and its teaching by properly trained teachers. After 13 years, research by Zormpala et al (2015) showed that, prospective teachers in universities are not trained in the effective use of art.

4. Theater in education

Aristotle with his work "Poetry" is one of the first ones to approach the definition of theater and drama. Since then, the words "theater" and "drama" can be interpreted in many ways. Bolton (1985) states that in the United Kingdom, the first one to introduce theater through theatrical play in schools was Peter Slade in the 1930s and 1940s. For Bolton (1985), drama differs from all other arts, as it is a collection of experiences and observations, but not of those that differentiate us from others, but of those that we share with others.

In the United States, Wright (1985) states that the main textbooks for drama teaching were those of Heinig & Stillwell (1981), McCaslin (1984) and Siks (1983). Analyzing the different approaches of the above textbooks, including the method of Heathcoate, she concludes that teachers should use drama from many aspects and, as animators, start teaching ways to act and react to different situations.

O'Toole (2005) states that drama in education depends to a large extent on the respective group of students that 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, with the result that 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.

4.1 Theater in education in Greece

The pedagogical application of theater enables students to benefit from it. This view has now been substantiated by many research projects in the field, affirming that theater in education is a powerful learning tool in the hands of teachers (Brown, 2017).

Theatrical education consists mainly of experiential activities. This nature of the lesson helps students develop and function with humanistic values (Dewey, 1986). They learn to collaborate, share ideas and improve their behavior. The release of creativity is a basic condition for the course of theatrical education.

In the Greek educational system, there is no prescribed curriculum as the course is not aimed at a predetermined right or wrong 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. The curriculum for primary school, before its abolition from the fifth and sixth grade, was divided into three axes each of which consists of two grades. In the first and second grades the lesson focuses on the physical and kinesiological expression of the students. In the third and fourth grade, it focuses on the general awareness around the theater. Finally, in the last two grades, the course can offer opportunities to process stimuli of individual expression, through the use of practices that students know from previous years. In high school, the course of theatrical education aims to cultivate critical thinking and a deeper approach to the history of theater. Dramatization, free improvisation and analysis of dramatic texts are offered as means to achieve this goal.

However, although the way in which the theatrical education course should be taught is described in detail and some activities are suggested to help teachers, these are not enough, making the whole procedure a matter of personal research.

5. Research methodology

5.1 Research questions

The main three research questions were:
1. 1) What are the views of theater educators, according with their academic background?
2. 2) Which are the problems and difficulties theater educators deal with their profession?
3. 3) What are the views of theater educators according to their training needs?

5.2 Research Method – Strategy – Research Tool

The data collection method was qualitative. The decisive factor was the harmonization of the method with the research problem. 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 Heraklio 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 semistructured interview. Such tool enables the sequence of questions to be modified (Bell, 2001), there is great adaptability, as the interviewer can at any point add ideas, 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.

5.3 The sample of the survey

The participants of the survey (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. 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.

5.4 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 moving in the same direction, but adding important details on thematic analysis.

6. Results

At the stage of information analysis, the following topics were selected and used.
• Academic background.
• Professional experience.
• Training needs.
• Educational preferences.

6.1 Academic background

Regarding their academic background and whether it was proper enough for their professional career, theater educators report data about proper academic preparation, remarkable academic accouterments and shortages in academic education.

The majority of the participants find that their academic preparation was sufficient.

...certainly academic preparation offers you a lot of basic knowledge but for a career it does not give all the necessary ingredients for the... suitable preparation of the teacher (I3)

...there was a preparation, due to the fact that half the lessons from the study guide were practical. Of course there was no internship at school (I6).

All of them mention that lack of practical courses was the most important deficiency in their academic curricula.

There was a lack...how to say it now... we did not do an internship at school, we did not go into school to do on-site training. (I6)

...the problem I basically faced was that I did not know what to expect, how to deal with 25 children in a classroom without space many times (I7)

Though, when it comes to practical courses (different theater techniques, directing, acting, improvisation, movement and music), they are presented as the most valuable accouterments.

...definitely helped that we had done a lot, some pedagogical lessons at university. The theatrical play I did also helped. Beyond that (also helped), acting lessons I had taken in university, movement, music, things like that. (I7)

...some practical lessons we had. I remember it was during the last semester. It was very interesting. From those lessons I learned a lot of things because it was all experiential (I8).

6.2 Professional experience

Regarding their professional experience, participants were asked to answer questions about challenging incidents in school, adequacy of knowledge regarding their profession, ways of professional development and improvement, general professional difficulties and professional support.

Concerning challenging incidents, participants focused on issues of special education and classroom management.

A demanding incident...I think what made it difficult for me, was at the beginning, classroom management. In a lesson that is not "Sit behind the desks, take a paper and a pencil and write or do that exercise now". (I11)

....in relation to colleagues, there is sometimes (difficulty in communication and cooperation). Certainly not in a large percentage. There was probably, (but) now things have changed a bit, I think, I do not know if you agree. There was a kind of devaluation, that we (theatre educators) are deputies (I6)

Meagerly, demanding incidents are identified in matters of organization and school life. Concerning the adequacy of educators' knowledge and whether they feel that they are capable of copping with, two evaluation questions were formed. The first issue, in relation to their adequacy, is towards the school and the second towards the students. Towards school, they feel confident about what they have to teach. This of course, is a result of their professional experience. Towards students, they show a moderate attitude. They emphasize on the importance of their personal improvement and development.

Participant: You used the word knowledge.

Interviewer: Yes

P: Yes. Knowledge. Yes. I have the necessary knowledge. I believe that one hundred percent....but knowledge alone is not enough to stand in a classroom. (I5)

I think so(having the necessary knowledge). And even more. (but) if you asked me this at (20)'10, when I first started, I would say no, because I really did not know in the first year what I was doing and if I was doing it right. But now with the study I have done and the discussions that I have taken part, I believe that I have entered good waters. (I12)

...for the students...well... for them I have enough (knowledge), but certainly for me no, and since school is constantly changing and students change their interests, this lesson (drama in education) in order to keep interested the students, it should follow the changes. So I would say that I have the necessary knowledge but they certainly are not enough. (I8)

In relation to professional development and improvement, 4 categories emerged: experience through the classroom, personal research, relationships with colleagues, training programs. Most of the participants revealed that they managed to develop professionally through their daily engagement with the lesson itself and the students.

...time (in classroom) somehow (should be spent) and I had to find solutions many times in chaos I faced and did not know what to do. (I7)

Probably children's need for more play, which necessarily leads you to...to read, to invent different ways. (I6)

Regarding general professional difficulties, the main problem seems to be the lack of a suitable classroom and the lack of appropriate equipment that makes the teaching of theatrical education particularly difficult.

Difficulties... Too many. Like I told you, I do not have a classroom. there is not a separate classroom for theatrical education. So I do my lesson in teacher's classroom, where there is no computer, there is no projector, of course, there is no sound system, there is nothing but desks and chairs. (I11)

Finally, about professional support, participants answered that the most valuable role is that of their colleagues, and especially the principal. The latter role, determines the quality of the relation between theater educator, school and other colleagues.

...there are definitely several colleagues who are always by your side no matter what you ask them in whatever you need, of course it is not necessary that you will always find this.... (I3)

Hm... If you are lucky to be with a good manager you may be able to manage some of the problems. Solutions are given very rarely (I6).

6.3 Educational preferences

Regarding their participation in training programs, theater educators expressed by answering questions about their reasons for participation, the effectiveness of the programs in which they participated and their expectations.

In general, theater educators emphasize on the lack of information they have about training programs. The main way to be informed about training programs is through the internet, through discussions with colleagues but also via relevant posts on the page of PESYTH.

Theater educators choose to participate in a training program due to personal interest, professional development and professional obligation.

...I am a person who is always interested in improving my professional knowledge. (I5)

Because I want to grasp piece by piece whatever has to do with my work and see exactly what is happening and watch the changes in order to improve my job. (I13)

Half of theater educators answered that the effectiveness of training programs enriched their knowledge.

Yes. Yes, it always gives you new ideas. You can take some elements alter them and integrate them in your own program. Not as they are but to differentiate them. Certainly keeps you awake a seminar or a training program. It does not allow you to swamp, which is a risk when you do this profession for several years. (I11)

Finally their expectations seems to be the acquirement of new knowledge.

My expectations are that, when you attend a seminar, I want in the end to go back look and see that I have learned something more, and that new knowledge I want to apply either directly or indirectly in the classroom. (I3)

...when the program is over it has to learned me something that has changed the way I think, in the way I approach my lesson, in the way I manage my students and the classroom. With one word it should be inspiring. (I5)

To improve the way I work. To learn more about how to better manage your subject. (I12)

6.4 Training needs

Theater educators' training preferences were expressed by answering questions about the content of training, the 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.

As far as the content of the training programs, theater educators referred to both practical and theoretical issues. ...practices on how to teach theatrical play, creative ideas, em...how to deal with some difficulties in the classroom. (I6)

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)

...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)

They choose a public host to implement training programs, because they consider that it will be possible for all theater educators to participate without any financial cost.

...definitely free from the ministry and to be within the school, i.e. as the training programs are done for other teachers. (I7)

The Ministry. Yes, because it is something objective, something that is offered to everyone. Because I may have to give the money to go to Athens to do the training. But if a colleague does not have, the ministry must provide, and train the educators. Yes, it is his own work entirely (I11)

The most appropriate time period for implementing a training program was captured, by the participants, with quite interesting variation. The data obtained, show a preference for the implementation of on-the-job training during the morning hours.

At school time. Because it is considered school training. The name says it all. I think it is perfectly fruitful to do it in the afternoon, but I do not think it is right since the legal framework says that everyone else does 8 to 1 training so do we. If everyone else does training in the afternoon I will be happy to do it in the afternoon too. (I2)
But there was 3 participants who think that ideally they should be done overtime because there is far more free time.

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

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)

The form that an education program should ideally have, is the one with physical presence. Most of the participants prefer to participate in various programs with workshops and experiential exercises.

...not in the same way that they are done for teachers. Our lesson has a different nature, it cannot remain in a theoretical context. What I want to say is that for us it would be better to have experiential trainings. Okay, theory is good but it is better when you have something learned firsthand. (I8)

On the other hand, none of the participants showed interest in training, only from distance.

However 2 participants prefer a mixed model.

...to create a public organization or company of theatrologists who will organize training seminars that will be accessible to all or electronically due to long distance. (I4)

...in all ways and via the internet and better the physical presence. Via the internet would be useful. For those in remote areas. (I9)

Finally, the appropriate time to complete a training cycle, the data obtained showed a 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.

...If it's something I do not know I could stay in training 2 or 3 months, maybe all year, depending, I do not know... it matters who will do it and what it will have as content. (I8)

On the contrary, the maximum ideal duration is 2 to 3 years.

...Difficult question because as we know most seminars are done now in half or a year. I would say that ideal training should be time consuming. 2 or 3 years. But without, of course, having daily lessons. It should have more sparse lessons, but to be in a longer period of time. In order to have time between the meeting lessons to immerse yourself in what you learned in each session. It should not intended that you take one lesson at a time to finish. You will not be able to (I3)

An important element of the answers is that all participants believe that the training process should be ongoing.

We certainly should not be talking about one-week or three-day seminars that will stop later. It should be an ongoing training, maybe two or three weekends a month for two months or at least something more. It should be continuous, not to be a fragmentary event like a firework (I4)

7. Conclusions.

In conclusion, theater educators' view of their academic background is that there is a lack of internships within the school and classroom. This can't help them cope with school reality and provide them with basic situation management tools in a classroom with students. An appropriate training program such as Flynn & Carr (1994) could be a good practice.

As a result of lack of internship the main problem occurs in classes with students who have special educational needs. Participants report that, because they do not have the necessary knowledge to manage such students, they feel that their efficiency get more difficult. The supplies they have to deal with such situations come from the experiences they gained over the years of service. However, this does not seem to be enough for them as they

consider scientific knowledge in the field to be necessary. They also, state that they have the same problem in matters of classroom management which are treated in a similar way.

As society constantly evolves, theater educators consider themselves as part of this evolution and they have to offer to their students more learning opportunities. This view is identical with that of Vergidis et al. (2010) at the point where professional development is mentioned as absolutely necessary. The importance of comprehensive human development, which is achieved through the involvement of art, is emphasized by both Flannery (1973) and Dewey (1958). The course of theatrical education and consequently the profession of theater educators contribute not only to the quality renewal but also to the comprehensive education since the main component is art. This position is also supported by Weitz (1972).

By acquiring the appropriate supplies, theater educators will be able to lead students to what Bolton (1985) and Brown (2017) articulate about educational drama, which is, learning through dialogue, collaboration and creative problem solving. When it comes, though, to professional development, the results showed that the information they have about the programs implemented by public carriers is incomplete. An important element is that all participants have taken part in a program so they can have an opinion on what suits them in terms of content. This view of the content and effectiveness of a program is also reflected in the research of Gokmenoglu et al. (2016). It is also important that they consider that the trainings enrich their knowledge and improve their teaching practices. Furthermore, 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 the training that theater educators mention is the one that will give them the necessary supplies.

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