PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT: *The rapid changes in the socio-economic environment and the consequent pressures for educational reforms make it more than necessary to empower teachers who need to redefine their teaching strategies to meet students' differentiated needs. Related studies suggest that teachers need to feel empowered to be effective and empower students. Therefore, the empowerment of teachers is at the center of the processes for quality improvement and school upgrade. The purpose of this study is to capture the views of primary education teachers on the opportunities for professional empowerment provided in their school environment. A total of 124 primary education teachers in Ilia Prefecture who participated in the quantitative sample survey completed an electronic questionnaire based on the Teacher Empowerment Scale. The presentation and analysis of the findings show that participants in all dimensions of empowerment have moderate to high degree of agreement. Specifically, the highest average dimension is that of decision-making, while the lowest average is that of professional development.*

KEYWORDS*: Empowerment, teachers, professional development, participation, decision making.*

INTRODUCTION

The multiple and widespread changes in the political, economic, social and technological field are creating strong pressures and challenges for the educational community with the main aim of improving the quality of education provided through the effective operation of schools. In this context, teachers, as a key component of the educational process, are invited to redefine their teaching and pedagogical approaches in order to respond to their multidimensional and increasingly demanding role. Recent research has shown increased work stress and progressive depletion of teachers as a result of the low social status and recognition they enjoy. An important factor is that their work lacks meaning due to the impediment of effective participation in educational activities and the absence of a supportive framework from school management (Antoniou &Dalla, 2010).

An indispensable condition for the development and improvement of teachers is their professional empowerment, that is, the ability of teachers to be involved in making decisions regarding school life and general educational policy (Bolin, 1989). Empowering teachers through their effective participation in decision-making, empowerment and leadership, the promotion and utilization of their skills has a positive impact on their job satisfaction, enhances their professional prestige and self-efficiency, increases their productivity and overall improves the efficiency of the school unit (Samara, 2015; Christou, 2010).

Although the central challenge of educational reforms for school effectiveness and continuous improvement imposes the strengthening of the personal and professional empowerment of teachers, who are the central pillar of educational change implementation (Day, 2003; Papanaoum, 1995), there is a deficit in Greek bibliography on this subject.

Therefore, the present research effort attempts to explore the views of primary education teachers on the six dimensions of vocational empowerment (decision making, autonomy, professional development prestige - self-efficacy, self-efficacy, influence) of the Short and Rinehart model. (1992). In addition, it seeks to reflect teacher empowerment levels and illuminate individual aspects of the school context that enhance or hinder the process of teacher empowerment.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Empowering teachers

Empowerment is a multidimensional concept, a network of ideas, actions, practices and at the same time a mechanism of interaction and activation aiming at empowering and developing employees. Empowerment is directly related to traditional concepts that surround management such as the concepts of assignment and delegation of power, employee participation, development and motivation as well as commitment to the organization (Bourandas, 2002, p. 497).

First of all, it is a process that refers to the choices of the organization and the manager to transfer responsibilities and power, to mobilize and develop employees in order to maximize performance and job satisfaction. In addition, it is also considered as a final outcome referring to the consolidation of work behaviors and attitudes through the concept of work (Bourandas, 2002).

In particular, teacher empowerment refers to the opportunities given to teachers for freedom of choice, responsibility, personal and professional development, and effective participation in decision making (Short & Rinehart, 1993). Empowered educators derive job satisfaction, have a high sense of self-efficacy and autonomy, develop professionally, and also develop a culture of collaboration and mutual trust. In addition, Hobbs and Morellad (2009, p. 1) argue that empowerment refers to "people who acquire knowledge, skills and power necessary to influence their lives and the lives of the people they care about".

In addition, according to Hatzipanayiotou (2008), teacher empowerment is related to the unleashing of teacher's creative power, which contributes to school effectiveness. Thus, it is considered as an investment in the sense that "teachers are given the right to participate in the formulation of school goals and policies thus developing their professional judgment on what and how to teach" (Bolin, 1989, p. 82).

Subsequently, Devos, Tuytens, and Hulpia (2014, p. 105) typically report that empowerment develops "where leadership is distributed among all members of the leadership team and where teachers can participate in decision-making practices and processes" and empowerment is understood as a mechanism of interaction and influence. Assigning power and strengthening autonomy reduces the school's supervisory role by forming a non-hierarchical network of equitable cooperation. Freire (2004) expresses a differentiated view that empowerment does not provide power, but is an effective tool for influence and personal development.

It is worth noting that teacher empowerment plays a key role in empowering the school unit through the creation of a positive climate of cooperation and communication, interaction and development of personal autonomy, responsibility and self-sufficiency (Avidoc-Ungar, Friedman & Olsthain, 2014). Encouraging collaboration and stimulating self-esteem and self-efficacy are important motivations that enhance teachers' positive attitude, professional satisfaction, and commitment to achieving school organization goals (Bogler & Somech, 2004).

The integration of the process of empowerment into the culture of the school organization is evidenced by the fact that the teacher can have complete control over his / her work and develop his / her knowledge and skills. Also, the school environment enables teachers to have the autonomy to make their own choices and participate in decision making, and consequently teachers themselves have a high sense of self-efficacy and professionalism (Pan & Wang, 2002).

Factors affecting the empowerment of teachers are the pressure exerted by the external environment for continuous improvement and learning outcomes but also the teachers themselves, the recipients of empowerment, who seek greater involvement in educational and training activities (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The principal and the school unit shape the supportive framework of teacher empowerment through processes of delegating authority, responsibility, training and lifelong learning, as well as building collaborative culture and trust (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

However, there are also difficulties or obstacles that hinder the manager's efforts to empower educators and deal with the conflicting climate, teachers' professional burnout, their reluctance to participate in decision-making and resistance to business change (Janssen, 2004). In addition, the centralized nature of the education system and the diminished autonomy of the school unit due to the complexity of the principal's work have been hindered by empowerment efforts (Passiardis, 2004; Koutouzis, 2008; Saitis, 2008;).

Interestingly, Wilson and Coolican (1996) attempt to categorize teachers' sources of empowerment and refer to them as external and internal power. External reinforcement refers to the provision of information and knowledge that contributes to professional development and performance improvement while internal strength refers to the existence of internal motivation, effectiveness, confidence and determination that characterize empowered individuals.

In their attempt to document teachers' empowerment more fully, Lee and Nie (2014) categorize empowerment into structural-social and psychological. Structural empowerment refers to administrative practices of school leadership which favor teacher empowerment on the one hand and concession of strength and power along with ability of participation in decision making and on the other hand accessibility to information and opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge and competences. Psychological approach relates to the concepts of meaning, self-efficiency and autonomy, as experienced in the workplace by the teacher himself.

An integrated view of teacher empowerment should include both a structural-organizational and psychological-emotional approach. This is because sometimes the objective conditions of administrative practices and the school context can be empowering for teachers but they themselves do not feel empowered (Gorezis, 2011). Also, teachers' subjective perceptions of empowerment may be positive in a non-supportive school environment. This requires a holistic

approach with the coexistence of both types of empowerment.In this context, the model of empowerment proposed by Short and Rinehart combines structural and psychological direction and is a coherent and structured approach that is based on the following six key dimensions:

1. Participation in decision-making processes

This dimension refers to the effective involvement of teachers in decisions that are vital to the overall functioning of the school and the effectiveness of their daily work. The significant involvement of teachers in decision-making creates commitments to decision implementation and increased responsibility for the correctness and justification of choices (Everard, & Morris, 1999).

2. Professional development

Professional development refers to teachers' beliefs about the opportunities for professional and personal development offered by the school through processes of continuous learning, enrichment, nurturing and upgrading of knowledge and the development of new skills (Hickey & Harris, 2005). Essentially it is a lifelong learning, the sum of formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences that take place throughout teachers' career (Varsamidou & Rees, 2006). The role of professional development is considered crucial and has a significant impact on the remaining dimensions of empowerment (Lichtenstein, Mc Lauglin, & Knudsen, 1992).

3. Prestige – professional respect (status)

This dimension refers to the perception or feeling that teachers have of the respect, acceptance and recognition they enjoy at a personal and professional level (Short, 1994). Status refers to the attention the teacher receives from those involved in the school community. Professional respect refers to the degree of prestige a teacher receives from recognizing his work (Sawchuk, 2012).

4. Self-efficacy

Teachers 'self-efficacy is a system of teachers' beliefs about their ability to promote student learning (Woolfolk & Spero, 2005). According to Bandura (1994), individuals with high self-efficacy have confidence in their abilities, face difficulties as challenges, do not give up, and have strong motivations.

5. Professional autonomy

Professional autonomy concerns their ability to control dimensions of their working lives and make decisions on strategic planning issues, curriculum, textbooks, teaching (Short, 1994). It is the rival concept of centralized state policy and is defined as the ability to participate in strategic decision-making but also as the ability to self-identify the professional identity, self-efficacy and self-evaluation of educational work (Matsagoura, 2004).

6. Influence on school life

This particular dimension of influence concerns teachers' perceptions of the impact their work behavior has on school life and the educational work produced. It mainly refers to teachers'

perceptions regarding the resonance their ideas and suggestions receive and the recognition that their successful practices receive by those involved in the school community (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Davidson & Dell, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Research aim

The purpose of this study is to record the views of the primary education teachers on the empowerment they receive regarding the opportunities provided in the school environment. Therefore, the present research tries to answer the following research question: What are the teachers' views on the following six dimensions of empowerment: a) Participation in decision making b) Autonomy c) Professional Development d) Prestige - Professional respect e) Self-efficacy f) Influence.

Research tool and sample

The present study selected a quantitative methodology using a questionnaire on the grounds that quantitative sampling enables the collection of data from large population samples and is used to measure views and trends in education (Greswell, 2011). It also has a short duration and minimal cost (Robson, 2010). The sampling method can be described as convenient or 'convenience' sampling, since the researcher targets individuals easily accessed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008). Data were analyzed with SPSS v17.

The research aimed at primary school teachers in Ilia Prefecture and was conducted from May10 to June 10, 2019. The specific period of the school year was chosen so that the new teachers could have a consolidated view of school events. The questionnaire was electronically sent to 12 elementary schools in Ilia Prefecture and was forwarded through the principals of the respective schools to 153 teachers. 124 questionnaires were completed and the percentage of respondents reached 81.04%.

The questionnaire includes 31 closed-ended sentences using the 5-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to choose between 1: strongly disagree, 2: rather disagree, 3: neither agree / disagree, 4: rather agree, 5: strongly agree. It consists of two parts. The first part deals with the demographic characteristics of the sample (gender, age, work experience, employment relationship, specialty, education), while the second part includes the Teacher Empowerment Scale (School Participant Empowerment Scale-Short & Rinehart, 1992). The scale consists of 25 questions and relates to the six dimensions of teacher empowerment. The scale has been translated into Greek and adapted to correspond to the Greek educational reality.

Prior to sending the questionnaire, 10 teachers were piloted to obtain the necessary feedback on the timing and clarity of the questions. Following the necessary corrections, which mainly included spelling, numbering errors and few wording questions, the Cronbach's Alpha reliability indices of the individual empowerment dimensions and the final questionnaire leadership models were formulated as follows: For the dimensions of professional empowerment of teachers: a) decision-making: a = 0.725, b) autonomy: a = 0.586, c) professional development: a = 0.855, d) prestige - professional respect: a = 0.554, e) self- effeciency: a = 0.722 and g) influence: a = 0.723, which are considered satisfactory.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The sample of our study consisted of 124 Primary Education Teachers of Ilia Prefecture, with the following characteristics. Gender: 72 were women (58.1%), and 52 were men (41.9%). Age: Most (42) were 31-40 years old (33.9%), 34 were 41-50 years old (27.4%), 31 were at least 51 years old (25.0%), and 17 were up to 30 years (13.7%). Work experience: Most (54) had 6-15 years (43.5%), 32 had 16-25 years (25.8%), 23 had at least 26 years (18.5%), and 15 had up to 5 years (12.2%). Employment relationship: 80 teachers were permanent (64.5%) and 44 were substitutes (35.5%). Specialty: 96 (77.4%) were teachers and 28 (22.6%) of other specialty. Level of study: 62 teachers had only a basic degree (50.0%), 45 postgraduate (36.3%), 10 had a post-secondary education degree (8.1%), 5 a second degree (4.0%) and 2 PhD (1.6%).

The questionnaire contained 25 statements - questions about teachers' views on the six (6) dimensions of their professional empowerment: a) decision-making, b) autonomy, c) professional development, d) prestige - professional respect, e) self-efficacy and g) influence. In all statements, the greater the value of respondents' answer, the higher their degree of agreement (where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither disagree / disagree, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly agree).

Concerning the dimension of participation in decision-making the average of the dimension was 3.96, the median was 4 and the standard deviation was 0.499, while the individual averages of all statements were above 3.68, indicating a high degree of agreement in all statements of dimension. Also, the reliability of the dimensional statements was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.725).

In the next dimension of professional autonomy, the overall average of the dimensions was 3.83, the median was 4 and the standard deviation was 0.642, while the individual averages of all statements were above 3.72, indicating a high degree of agreement in all statements of dimension. Also, the reliability of the dimensional statements was moderate (Cronbach's alpha = 0.586).

Concerning the dimension of professional development, the overall average of the dimension was 3.39, the median 3.5 and the standard deviation was 0.756, while the individual averages of all statements were above 3.15, indicating the medium to high degree of agreement in all statements of dimension. Also, the reliability of the dimensional statements was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.855).

In the case of prestige - professional respect the overall mean of the dimension was 3.83, the median was 4 and the standard deviation was 0.671, while the individual in averages of all statements were above 3.65, indicating a high degree of agreement all statements of dimension. Also, the reliability of the dimensional statements was moderate (Cronbach's alpha = 0.554).

As far as the self-efficacy dimension is concerned, the overall mean of the dimension was 3.82, the median was 3.8, and standard deviation was 0.538, while the individual averages of all statements were above 3.47, indicating a high degree of agreement in all statements of dimension. Also, the reliability of the dimensional statements was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.722).

Finally, regarding the dimension of influence, the overall mean of the dimension was 3.66, the median was 3.67 and the standard deviation was 0.653, while the individual averages of all

statements were above 3.48, indicating a moderate to a high degree of agreement in all statements of dimension. Also, the reliability of the dimensional statements was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.723).

To summarize, Table 1 and Graph 1 present the basic descriptive statistics of the 6 dimensions of teachers' professional empowerment. The overall average of the dimensions is 3.75 and the individual averages of all dimensions are above 3.39, indicating the medium to high degree of agreement of participants in all dimensions of empowerment (where 3 = "Neither disagree /Neither agree "and 4 =" I agree "). The highest average is in decision making (mean = 3.96), while the lowest is in professional development (mean = 3.39).

Table 1: Average of the 6 dimensions of professional empowerment

A/A	Empowerment dimension	Average	Standard deviation
1	Participation in decision making	3,96	0,499
2	Professional autonomy	3,83	0,642
3	Business development	3,39	0,756
4	Prestige - professional respect	3,83	0,671
5	Self-efficacy	3,82	0,538
6	Influence	3,66	0,653
Total average dimension		**3,75**	
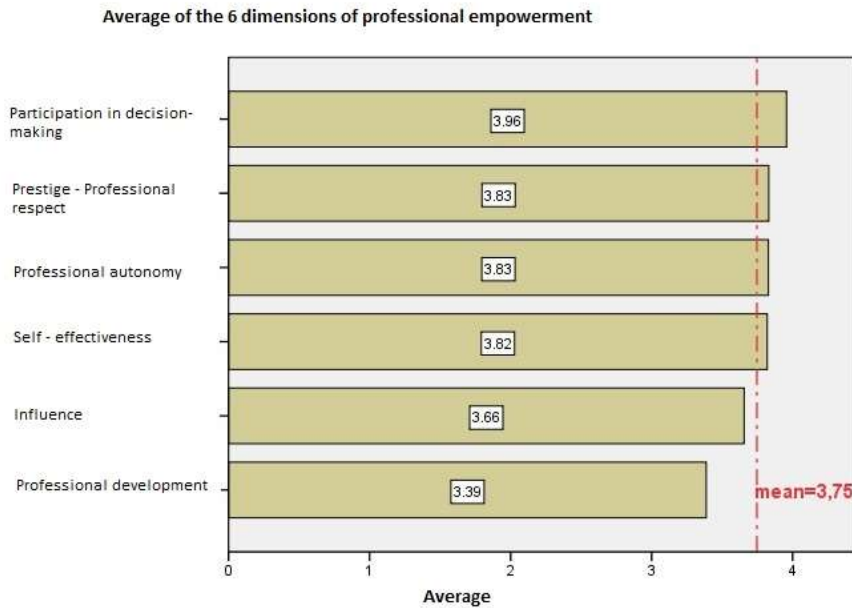
Graph 1: Average of the 6 dimensions of professional empowerment

DISCUSSION

The presentation and analysis of the findings show that participants in all dimensions of empowerment have moderate to high degree of agreement. Specifically, the dimension with the highest average is the participation in decision making (Avg = 3.96), while the smaller average is the dimension of professional development (Avg = 3.39).

The primacy of the decision-making dimension can be interpreted as a result of teachers' awareness that the issues arising in the school environment are complex and require constructive dialogue and systematic consultation in search of optimal solutions. In addition, the growing interest in decision-making is likely to be linked to the institutional strengthening of the role of the teachers' association which has recently been attempted to emerge as an elector in the case of the head teacher selection but also to the increased responsibilities which teachers have regarding the self-assessment process of the school unit.

The levels of empowerment are lower than the dimension of professional development with an overall average of 3.39, which indicates that teachers are skeptical about the opportunities for professional development. In particular, they believe that more time is needed in the meetings of the teachers' club for the exchange of views, good practices and reflective assessment of the educational work produced, and there is also the need for further classroom and neighboring collaboration (classroom teaching, exchange of visits).

Research limitations – Future research

The findings of the present study can lead to a fuller understanding of the contexts of the school environment related to specific dimensions of teacher empowerment, focusing primarily on the selection and utilization of supportive leadership models by school principals.However, this research is subject to limitations that cannot be ignored. Basic weakness is convenient or opportunistic sampling that creates representativeness problems for the population under study (Sarafidou, 2011), while the small sample size of a geographical area does not guarantee the validity of the results and is risky to be generalized.

Consequently, a survey that would include a sample with a larger geographical distribution and target primary and secondary teachers would provide a comparative and holistic view of the subject. The combined use of a quantitative and qualitative methodological approach could also identify additional aspects and enrich the research with new findings.

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