ANDREAS BROUZOS & KATERINA RAPTI

SCHOOL COUNSELING AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENCE IN THE GREEK SCHOOL

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Andreas Brouzos[1] & Katerina Rapti[2]

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Abstract

A basic condition for the welfare of contemporary pluralistic societies is the acceptance of difference. In this article following the presentation of the multicultural characteristics of Greek education and the historical background of school counseling in Greece, we suggest that boosting students' self-esteem via school counseling may facilitate the acceptance of difference. Greek school counselors can contribute significantly in the enhancement of students' self-esteem and effectively in the acceptance of difference.

Η Σχολική Συμβουλευτική και η Αποδοχή της Διαφορετικότητας στα Ελληνικά Σχολεία

Περίληψη

Η εργασία αφορμάται από τη θεώρηση ότι η αποδοχή της διαφορετικότητας αποτελεί βασική προϋπόθεση για την ευεξία των σύγχρονων πλουραλιστικών κοινωνιών. Μετά την επιγραμματική παράθεση των χαρακτηριστικών πολυπολιτισμικότητας της ελληνικής εκπαίδευσης, ακολουθεί σύντομη ιστορική αναδρομή της Σχολικής Συμβουλευτικής στην Ελλάδα. Στη συνέχεια παρουσιάζεται η πρόταση των συγγραφέων ότι η Σχολική Συμβουλευτική μπορεί να διευκολύνει την αποδοχή της διαφορετικότητας επικεντρώνοντας τις υπηρεσίες της στην ενίσχυση της αυτοεκτίμησης των μαθητών. Υποστηρίζεται, επίσης, ότι οι λειτουργοί συμβουλευτικής στην Ελλάδα μπορούν να συνδράμουν σημαντικά στην ενίσχυση της αυτοεκτίμησης των μαθητών και συνακόλουθα στην προαγωγή της αποδοχής της διαφορετικότητας.

1. Associate Professor, School of Education, Dept. of Primary Education, University of Ioannina, Greece.

2. Ph.D. Student, University of Ioannina.

Introduction

One of the major characteristics of modern societies is their multicultural and pluralistic nature (immigrants, refugees, minorities and people with special needs). The acceptance of difference has become a basic condition for the welfare of multicultural societies (UNESCO, 1999). Consequently, the focus of education in general and school counseling in particular is to promote and facilitate the acceptance of "difference".

In this article an attempt is made to describe the emerging multicultural profile of the Greek school. Next, the recent developments towards implementation of school counseling in the Greek school are reviewed. It is further suggested that school counseling can facilitate the acceptance of multiculturalism and diversity. We propose that school counselors' can help students to look within and to become knowledgeable about themselves. Self-esteem means self-acceptance; self-acceptance boosts the acceptance of others; acceptance of others promotes the acceptance of difference.

The multicultural nature of education in Greece

Greece has become a multicultural society in the last twenty years. This change has had many effects on all levels of Greek social, economic and cultural life as the country exerts considerable economic and political influence in the Balkans. Moreover, the collapse of the communist political system, the dramatic reclassifications in Europe due to the formation of new independent states instead of federations and the oppression of human rights in many Asian countries have contributed to Greece becoming a country that receives a large number of refugees and immigrants.

Moreover, developments both in Europe and all over the world have cultivated the idea of surpassing the prototype of the "nation-state" and turning into a broader notion of ethnic and cultural characteristics, which have caused the radical change in the organization, and functioning of countries including Greece. The phenomenon of globalization has had many influences on all social domains: language, culture, economy, social models etc. In multicultural societies there is a tendency to create a mankind called "homus universalis", a product of mixed cultures and cultural interactions (Nikolaou, 2000).

All the aforementioned changes have had significant effects on the Greek educational system. The composition of Greek classrooms has become diverse and education has to face the needs and challenges of multicultural schools. Large-scale educational studies have taken place in the two last decades

investigating the education of foreign students in Greece. New standards are also being promoted on an institutional and an organizational level. Novel educational materials are being prepared for children whose native language is other than Greek. Yet, an education for all children has a long way to become achieved. A school for children independently of ethnic origin, under the conditions of communication and cooperation which respects children's differences and rights is the goal of current Greek education.

School counseling in Greece

School counseling was first implemented in the Greek educational system at the beginning of the 1950's and provided services of vocational guidance. Vocational guidance became part of teachers' in-service training. At the same time the "School for Teachers of Vocational and Technical Education" (SELETE) was founded. Unfortunately, a few years later guidance and counseling in education was absolutely forgotten. In 1976 guidance in education was re-implemented as an "on trial" subject at the third year of secondary school, entitled School Vocational Guidance (Demetropoulos, 1998). Yet, in 1978, the first Department of Guidance and Vocational Guidance was founded. A few teachers were trained in basic skills of Guidance and Counseling for five months. However, the sort period of training and the small number of trainees were insufficient for a successful operation of Guidance and Counseling in the Greek schools.

A significant development was made between 1985-1994 when official places for teachers of School Vocational Guidance were founded. A separate department for School Vocational Guidance was founded in the Pedagogical Institute (Advisory Bureau for the Ministry of Education) and the training of teacher-counselors for the School Vocational Guidance was implemented.

In the same period, vocational guidance was also implemented to the five out of the six levels of secondary education. A teacher was assigned in each educational area who was responsible for the coordination of School Vocational Guidance. In 1994 School Vocational Guidance was, however, obliterated from the first two levels of secondary schools. Consequently "Guidance and Counseling" was downgraded to a simple information provision. No more teachers were trained in counseling skills.

The 1997 educational reform introduced some changes concerning School Guidance and Counseling. First, a new philosophy prevailed which aimed at providing help to students at all their developmental stages, understanding their abilities and promoting their social skills. As a result, the National Center for

Vocational Guidance was founded in Athens under the auspices of Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. Sixty-eight (68) Centers for Guidance and Counseling and two hundreds (200) Offices of School Vocational Guidance were founded all over the country. Yet, several teacher in-service courses on counseling skills took place. A few postgraduate courses for teacher-counselors were also established. The first graduates of these programs are now employed in the Offices of School Vocational Guidance in secondary schools all over the country while others are serving at the Centers for Guidance and Counseling.

School counseling enhances self esteem

One of the main aims of school counseling is helping students to look within and to become knowledgeable about themselves. Thus, counseling signifies helping students to build a sense of self-worthiness, their self-esteem.

The definitions of self-esteem vary considerably in both their breadth and psychological sophistication. Harter (1993), for example, defines self-esteem as how much a person likes, accepts, and respects himself or herself overall as a person. Brown and Alexander (1991) argue that self-esteem is the way individuals perceive and value themselves. Branden (1990) sees self esteem as having two interrelated aspects: a sense of personal efficacy (self-efficacy) or confidence in a person's ability to think and act; and a sense of personal worth (self-respect) or an affirmative attitude towards a person's right to live and to be happy.

Irrespectively of what definition we adopt, research from around the world lends empirical support to the notion that students' self esteem influences school achievement and adjustment in general. Battle (1990) and Bhatti et al. (1989), for example, found a significant relationship between self esteem and academic achievement. Holly (1987) compiled a summary of studies indicating that a certain level of self-esteem is required in order for a student to achieve academic success. Self esteem has also been found to affect dramatically students' social adjustment and this explains why it has become a first priority in school counseling.

The breadth of research findings showing the role that self esteem plays on personal adjustment and academic performance justifies the emphasis that is placed on it in school counseling. Among other things, counseling is help for self-help, encouragement, reinforcement and enhancement of self-confidence (Brouzos, 1990; Campion, 1991).

Acceptance of difference via the enhancement of students' self esteem

There is strong connection between self-esteem and self-acceptance, self-acceptance and accepting others, accepting others and accepting difference. It is essential to understand our own self-value before we set about understanding and accepting others. This understanding includes an awareness of one's self worthiness and capabilities, a recognition of our basic tendencies and world values. Lack of such understanding may hinder the acceptance of others.

Mosley (1997) outlines the merits and consequences of self-esteem both in the personal and the interpersonal domain. Low self-esteem signifies that we do not feel respected by others. This feeling weakens our self-image and confirms our opinion that we cannot succeed or fulfil our personal and occupational targets. The result is lower self-confidence that suspends our interpersonal relationships and makes us passive, aggressive or easily influenced by others. Low self-esteem makes one strict with others. In contrast, high self-esteem makes one feel that the others care. In the interpersonal relations we are honest and congruent, willing to deal with the difficulties and failures.

Thus, a sense of high self-esteem promotes the acceptance of others. The enhancement of students' self-esteem in school leads to the promotion of accepting the different others. In order to accept others students need to acknowledge their worthiness as respectful personalities.

Conclusions

Within the rapidly changing composition of Greek school, there is a great need for school counselors to integrate in students' lives issues related to multiculturalism and diversity. Beyond developing, implementing and evaluating culturally responsive guidance programs, this may also be achieved via the enhancement of students' self-acceptance and appreciation. Boosting students' self esteem will promote the acceptance of self and further the acceptance of others.

School counselors need to acknowledge that self esteem is a vital determinant of students' behavior and should be a major focus of the counseling relationship. They also need to recognize that students' self esteem impacts the way they see others. They further need to assist students to develop a high self esteem. Above all else, however, they should act upon the conviction that high self esteem is the basis for accepting the different others.

In Greek society there is a great tension margining minorities, an attitude that is also reflected in the Greek school system as well. There is an emerging demand to develop a school culture that accepts difference (Cummins, 1999).

Thus, school has to become a socializing factor, provide help and become a place of harmonious living so that it will satisfy the contemporary needs for accepting difference (Brouzos, 1990, 1998; von Hentig, 1993, 1996; Struck, 1994, 1995, 1996).

School can respond to its wider role -that is not limited to the provision of knowledge but is extended to the facilitation of students' personal and social development. School counselors need to boost students' self esteem in order to promote the acceptance of difference in the Greek school.

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