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A survey of Greek general and special education teachers' perceptions regarding the role of the special needs coordinator: Implications for educational policy on inclusion and teacher education

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the perceptions of Greek general and special primary teachers regarding the role and the professional characteristics of special needs coordinators (SENCOs). According to the responses of the 466 participants, each school should have a fulltime SENCO, who should have both teaching experience in general schools and specialization in teaching students with SEN, and also be able to deal with all types of SEN. SENCOs' responsibilities include evaluating and directly teaching students, counselling teachers and parents, contributing to in-service training of staff, and undertaking initiatives for program enrichment and knowledge dissemination.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive school practice has brought about changes in several dimensions of the educational support for students with special educational needs (SEN) (Clark, Dyson, Millward, & Robson, 1999; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000). One of the changes refers to the role, the professional qualities and the scientific characteristics of support teachers (Emanuelsson, 2001; Klinger & Vaughn, 2002). In most educational systems, support teachers had until recently the rather "narrow" role of trying to remedy the learning problems of children with SEN, by pulling them out of their general classroom and teaching them in small groups or on an individual basis (Forlin, 2001). In light of inclusion, educational authorities assign new responsibilities to support teachers, such as (a) the provision of professional guidance to general educators regarding the implementation of effective inclusion programs, and (b) the coordination of the provision for struggling learners, at the school level, by undertaking a more proactive role in the process of curriculum development and program modification (Emanuelsson, 2001; York-Barr, Sommers, Duke, & Ghore, 2005). These responsibilities have

drastically changed the traditional role of support teachers. According to Cheminais (2005), for example, the new role of support teachers in the schools of the 21st century demands them to be: lead professionals, advocates and managers of knowledge/information, commissioners and brokers, resource managers, partnership managers, quality assurers, facilitators, and solution managers. The new role of the support teacher is reflected also in the introduction of new terms, like "special needs coordinator" (Crowther, Dyson, & Millward, 2001), "support coordinator" (Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001) or "inclusion facilitator" (Weiner, 2003). In this study the term "special needs coordinator (SENCO)" will be used, as more accurate indicator of the emerging dimensions of the support teachers' role in the educational environment where the study was conducted.

1.1. Open issues and solutions regarding SENCO's

Reports from countries in which support teachers have already taken up the new role of SENCOs reveal that schools as organizations, general educators, and SENCOs themselves, face several challenges and dilemmas in their effort to adjust to the new situation (e.g. Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001; Crowther et al., 2001). Examples of issues that are vigorously discussed in the different educational systems, as they are approached in differentiated ways by the various agents involved in the formation of the SENCO's role, are

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the training and the qualifications that SENCOs should have, so that they can cope successfully with the demands of their role (e.g. Klinger & Vaughn, 2002); the model and the duration of co-teaching, that general educators and SENCOs should adopt (e.g. DeSimone & Parmar, 2006); the specific tasks that SENCOs should undertake and the allocation of time they should choose (e.g. Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001); and the number of children that SENCOs should teach directly (e.g. Crowther et al., 2001).

In order to deal with the above-mentioned and other pertinent challenges and dilemmas, each educational system produces relevant legislations and provides schools and teachers with guidance, thus formulating an official educational policy on the subject. For example, regulations of the Department for Children, Schools, and Families for England and Wales, that came into effect on September 1st 2009, require the SENCO: (1) to be a qualified teacher, or a person who has either served as SENCO for at least six months or is training to become a qualified teacher, and (2) to possess a senior management position in the school or liaise closely with a member of the senior leadership team (DfES, 2008). According to the same regulations, each school's governing body is responsible for determining SENCOs' exact responsibilities, as well as for monitoring SENCOs' effectiveness in carrying out their role. These regulations follow earlier attempts (e.g. The SENCO Guide – G.B. DfE, 1997) to delineate important parameters of SENCOs' identity and role, and to offer guidelines for the effective functioning of SENCOs in the wide range of contexts in which they work. However, many countries, including Greece where this study took place, lack similar specific legislations and guidelines (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010; Mitchell, 2005).

1.2. Importance of teachers' perceptions

Regulations, laws, circulars, codes of practice, and other legal documents constitute outlets for the official educational policy, which, however, is not realized literally, but is rather interpreted and put into practice in accordance with the local circumstances (e.g. Crowther et al., 2001). Local circumstances may prevent the realization of official educational policy or alter its character, especially in educational systems in which production of educational policy takes place at many different levels (Fulcher, 1989). An important parameter of the local circumstances, especially of the school conditions, is teachers' perceptions of their role and the role of other professionals involved in school practice (Vlachou, 2006; York-Barr et al., 2005). Janney, Snell, Beers, and Raynes (1995) have found that when school objectives, policies, functions, and responsibilities change drastically, without teachers' prior and adequate information on their nature, teachers experience confusion and uncertainty, and develop negative attitudes toward the new measures, thus undermining their success. Hence, it is of vital importance to adequately inform teachers on the nature of any new measure, to pay attention to their opinion regarding its viability, and to try to secure their consent, before its introduction; otherwise, the measure might fail. Especially when the measure to be introduced involves role changes, as in the case of the introduction of SENCOs, teachers' perceptions need to be carefully examined, since research shows that the way teachers perceive the parameters of their work, and especially their role and the role of other professionals with whom they have to cooperate to achieve common goals, is a key determinant of the outcome of any (inclusion) program (Kochhar, West, & Taymans, 2000; McLeskey & Waldron, 2000).

The need for a careful examination of teachers' perceptions regarding the introduction of SENCOs is even more predominant in educational systems characterized by the production of educational policy at many different levels, as in such systems state definitions

of roles, duties, and appropriate practices serve mainly as frameworks of confrontations among the competing interests of each level (Vlachou, 2006). The Greek educational system is one of those systems in which there is often a gap between the existing educational policy and the implemented school practice (Vlachou, 2004). In the Greek educational system teachers enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their classrooms, and despite the fact that all decisions on educational policy are officially being made centrally (by the Ministry of Education), there are several examples of legislation (e.g. legislation on assessment of school quality, teacher accountability, and classroom organization), that have been neutralized by the open opposition of the Teachers' Unions or by the tacit resistance or uncooperative stance of schools or individual teachers (Vlachou, 2006). In reference to the education of students with special needs, Greece follows the one-track approach that promotes the right of every child to be educated in regular educational settings (European Agency for the Development in Special Needs Education, 2003), especially since the implementation of the laws 2817/2000 and 3699/2008 on special education.

1.3. Inclusion in Greece and the prospective role of SENCOs

Greek general and special educators maintain neutral (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Padelidou & Lampropoulou, 1997) to positive (Batsiou, Bebetos, Panteli, & Antoniou, 2006) attitudes toward inclusion, and examples of successful inclusive programs, do exist in the Greek educational reality (e.g. Agaliotis, 2002). It should be pointed out, however, that although inclusion has a prominent place in the official documents specifying the Greek educational policy on special education, it does not have an equally prominent treatment in daily school practice (Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006). Support for students with SEN is mainly provided through traditional pull out programs. Greek educators hold many restricted and restrictive beliefs, which hinder the development of inclusive practices (Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006), and they often express concern about the feasibility of inclusion, naming as their main arguments against it: time shortage, lack of specialized knowledge on their side, the high demands of the curriculum, and potential problems in the academic progress of non-disabled students (Agaliotis, 2002).

SENCOs have not been officially introduced, yet, in the Greek educational system. However, many qualified support teachers either working in resource rooms or instructing students with SEN in general classrooms through the so called "parallel support programs", assume unofficially the role of SENCOs, in the sense that they are very often expected to offer to their general education colleagues (not only those with whom they co-teach, but also to other members of staff) their professional opinion on various issues pertaining to the support of students with SEN. Moreover, these educators are often asked to make suggestions to the school principal, regarding the best way to use school's resources to the benefit of struggling learners. This situation can also be found, to a certain extent, in other educational systems too (e.g. McQuarrie & Zarry, 1999). Teachers' Confederation of Greece has repeatedly put forward the suggestion that each school should have a teacher designated to support students with disabilities and to offer guidance and specialized help to the other members of the school personnel (e.g. Teachers' Confederation, 2007, 2009). This suggestion seems justified under the light of research results showing that the majority of Greek teachers are dissatisfied with the work of the Centers for Differential Diagnosis, Assessment, and Support (CDDAS), which are the agencies designated by the law for evaluating students with special needs, writing their IEPs and generally supporting school personnel in instructing students with SEN (Agaliotis, Platsidou, & Kartasidou, 2009). Moreover, the suggestion

of Teachers' Confederation acquires enhanced dynamic after the passing of the law 3699/2008 on special education, which puts great emphasis on inclusion, declaring as obligatory for the schools the undertaking of inclusive measures (like the use of the principles of "universal design" for the curriculum organization). In light of these conditions the view can be taken, then, that regarding the intentions of the decision makers and the consent of the involved agents, the circumstances for the introduction of SENCOS in the Greek educational system are favorable, and the assumption that this introduction will take place in the immediate future seems justified. Considering the difficulties that emerged in most educational systems upon the introduction of SENCOS (e.g. Szwed, 2007), and the peculiarities of the Greek educational system, the view can be supported that it would be very useful for legislators, educators, parents, and students with SEN if the perceptions of Greek general and special educators regarding the specifics of the role of SENCOS were known before its introduction.

Within the afore-mentioned context, the main aim of the present study is to identify the key factors that define the role of SENCOS in Greek schools according to educators. A secondary aim is to compare the views of general and special educators, who are called to work together with SENCOS and may have different perceptions about their role.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample of the present study consisted of a total of 466 primary education teachers (192 males – 41.2% and 274 females – 58.8%) holding fulltime teaching positions in public schools situated in different regions of mainland Greece. There were 228 qualified special education teachers working either in resource rooms or in special schools (48.9%) and 238 general education teachers working in mainstream schools (51.1%). The age of the sample ranged from 24 to 59 years old, with a mean age of 40 years and 1 month ($SD = 6.63$). Their years of teaching experience varied from 1 to 34, with a mean of 15 years and 7 months ($SD = 7.44$). The distribution of the sample is presented in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire that the participants were asked to fill in included questions partly referring to the seven key areas of SENCO's responsibility set out in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Pupils with Special Educational Needs (GB – DfE, 1994), which are: (1) the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy; (2) liaising with and advising fellow teachers; (3) coordinating provision for children with special educational needs; (4) maintaining the school's SEN register and overseeing the records on all pupils with special needs; (5) liaising with parents; (6) contributing to in-service training of staff; (7) liaising with external agencies. Selection and formulation of the questionnaire's 32 statements was also based on the *Questionnaire of the Role of the Special Needs Coordinator in Schools* developed by Crowther et al.

(2001), as well as on the tasks, roles, and skills of the SENCO that were described by Arnaiz and Castejon (2001) in Spain, Pijl and Van den Bos (2001) in the Netherlands, and Szwed (2007) in the UK, with the necessary adjustments to meet the Greek reality regarding special needs education. For example, according to the Greek law special educators cannot hold senior management positions, apart from the Heads of Special Schools and the School Advisors. Hence, questions regarding managerial status and positional power of SENCOS would, probably, not make sense to Greek educators, and were not included in the questionnaire. Another issue that had to be taken into consideration in the construction of the questionnaire is that it should include questions on the scientific background and the expertise of SENCOS, as a main aim of the study was the investigation of Greek teachers' perceptions regarding SENCOS' scientific and professional qualities. The participants were asked to indicate how important they thought that each task/role/skill was for a SENCO on a Likert scale from 1 to 4, where 1 = not at all important and 4 = extremely important. Data were also provided on the age, gender, and teaching experience of the participants. The questionnaire also included three open questions regarding (a) SENCOS' caseload, (b) the amount of hours SENCOS should devote to each student with SEN, and (c) the range of SEN types each SENCO should be specialized in.

2.3. Procedure

The researchers submitted the appropriate ethics forms to the university ethics committee and ethics permission was granted for carrying out the specific project. Then, the researchers took a list of all the primary schools in Northern mainland Greece and randomly selected every 4th school starting from the bottom of the list, until they came up with 50 schools. After approaching the head teachers and informing them about the aim of the project, they briefed all the teaching staff and asked them whether they would like to participate in the present study. Out of the 508 teachers who were approached 466 (91.7%) agreed to take part in the present study and the response rate is extremely satisfactory. The very high compliance rate was probably due to the nature of the research that was of interest to participants and to the fact that the researchers went to each school in person and explained to potential participants the significance of the study for their professional development. The completion of the questionnaire took place after classes or during the school breaks and lasted approximately 20 min. The questionnaires were returned completed in a sealed envelope to the researchers to reassure anonymity and confidentiality.

3. Results

The participants claimed that SENCOS should be assigned an average of 7.6 children and spend on average 6.7 h per week with each child with SEN. For collaboration with staff and parents, student assessment, and other obligations, the SENCO should spend on average 14.8 h in each school. More than half of the participants (53.9%) said that the SENCO should deal with all types of SEN, while the remaining 46.1% said that the SENCO should specialize in

Table 1
Characteristics of the Sample.

	Special needs educators	General educators	
Age	$M = 39.6$ ($SD = 6.32$)	$M = 40.6$ ($SD = 6.88$)	$t(464) = -1.95, p = .052$
Teaching experience	$M = 15.5$ ($SD = 6.80$)	$M = 15.9$ ($SD = 8$)	$t(464) = -.61, p = .543$
Gender			$\chi^2 = .55, df = 1, p = .458$
Male	$N = 90$ (39.5%)	$N = 102$ (42.9%)	
Female	$N = 138$ (60.5%)	$N = 136$ (57.1%)	

particular kinds of SEN. Moreover, almost 2/3 of the participants (65%) said that the SENCO should be trained both in special and general education, whereas 35% said that the SENCO needed only special education training. Independent samples *t*-test analysis showed that special and general educators did not differ significantly in the amount of hours per week they thought that the SENCO should spend at school ($t_{(464)} = -.73, p = .466$) and the amount of hours per week they thought that the SENCO should spend with each child with SEN ($t_{(464)} = .05, p = .959$), but they did differ significantly in the number of children they thought should be assigned to each SENCO ($t_{(464)} = -2.25, p = .025$). More specifically, it was found that special educators ($M = 5.69$) thought that each SENCO should be assigned fewer children than general educators ($M = 7.67$). Finally, chi-square analysis revealed that special and general educators did not differ significantly in the range of types of SEN they thought that SENCOs should deal with ($\chi^2_{(1)} = .61, p = .437$) and in the kind of training that SENCOs should have ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 3.25, p = .071$).

The factorability of the 32 items of the SENCO questionnaire was examined. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .93, which is extremely satisfactory and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2_{(595)} = 5291.51, p = .000$). Finally, the communalities were all above .3, further confirming that each item shared common variance with other items. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis was conducted with all 32 items.

Principal component analysis was used because the primary purpose was to identify and compute composing characteristics for the factors underlying the SENCO questionnaire. The initial eigen

values showed that the first factor explained 26% of the variance, the second factor 7.3%, the third factor had eigen values of over one, explaining more than 4%, and the fourth and fifth factors had eigen values of over one, each explaining more than 3% of the variance. Four, five, six, and seven factor solutions were examined, using both varimax and oblimin rotations of the factor loading matrix. The five factor solution was preferred because of its previous theoretical support, the 'leveling off' of eigen values and the difficulty in interpreting the sixth and seventh factors. During several steps, two items "to have worked as an educator for many years" and "to manage successfully the time they have at their disposal in order to fulfill their duties" were eliminated because they did not contribute to a simple factor structure and failed to meet a minimum criterion of having a primary factor loading of .4 or above. So, a principle components factor analysis was conducted on the remaining 30 items, with the five factors explaining 52% of the variance. The factor loading matrix for this final solution is presented in Table 2.

Internal consistency for each of the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha and the results are as follows: Factor 1 – educational provision to students with SEN (9 items) = .81; Factor 2 – scientific and professional identity (7 items) = .78; Factor 3 – collaboration with fellow teachers and parents (6 items) = .72; Factor 4 – initiatives for program enrichment, knowledge dissemination, and teacher evaluation (4 items) = .74; Factor 5 – contribution to in-service training of staff and fund raising (4 items) = .62; and whole scale (30 items) = .91. No substantial changes in alpha for any of the scales could have been achieved by eliminating more items. Composite scores were created for each of the five factors, based on the mean of the

Table 2
Factor loadings and communalities based on a principle components analysis with oblimin rotation for 32 items of the SENCO questionnaire ($N = 466$).

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Communalities
To update the files of children with SEN.	.77					.63
To follow the progress of children with SEN.	.73					.65
To decide the educational placement of children with SEN.	.63					.58
To prepare the activities that educators need to teach children with SEN.	.61					.49
To teach children with SEN.	.51					.55
To inform parents and educators about the progress of children with SEN.	.46					.55
To be able to accurately diagnose the disorders of each child with SEN.	.46					.60
To support children with SEN beyond school (e.g. at home).	.43					.60
To write the individualized educational plans.	.41					.46
To be trained to teach in ordinary schools.		.60				.52
To be trained to effectively deal with the difficulties that children with SEN face.		.58				.54
To be kept constantly updated on developments in the field of SEN.		.55				.61
To visit the school regularly.		.50				.45
To participate in scientific conferences.		.48				.58
To engage in studies with other experts to improve teaching children with SEN.		.46				.63
To be in contact with mental health professionals and other experts.		.45				.56
To discuss with teaching staff about the condition of each individual child with SEN in order to make the right decisions.			.57			.56
To coordinate people with differing or opposing points of view.			.56			.56
To closely cooperate with parents of children with SEN and to advise them.			.55			.62
To closely cooperate with educators and to advise them.			.53			.38
To be willing to devote their free time to fulfill their duties.			.67			.64
To evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching methods that the educators use in the classroom.			.58			.62
To organize lectures for the training of teaching staff and of parents of children with SEN.				.57		.65
To implement pilot teaching and socialization programs within the school setting.				.46		.61
To organize activities for the inclusion of children with SEN in the wider community.				.44		.55
To be open to new ideas and suggestions about the teaching programs that they use.				.64		.63
To introduce innovative teaching methods by delivering exemplary lessons.					.60	.73
To try to obtain funding from governmental or other organizations.					.54	.62
To regularly train staff working with children with SEN.					.49	.62
To provide the school with the necessary material for teaching children with SEN.					.42	.53

Notes. Factor loadings < .4 are suppressed.

Factor 1 – educational provision to students with SEN.

Factor 2 – scientific and professional identity.

Factor 3 – collaboration with fellow teachers and parents.

Factor 4 – initiatives for program enrichment, knowledge dissemination, and teacher evaluation.

Factor 5 – contribution to in-service training of staff and fund raising.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of the Tasks/Roles/Skills that are Important for the SENCO According to Special Needs and General Educators.

SENCO questionnaire	Special Needs	General	$F_{(1, 464)}$
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
Educational provision to students with SEN	26.44 (5.13)	29.11 (4.15)	37.97*
Scientific and professional identity	29.04 (2.97)	28.32 (3.25)	6.31*
Collaboration with fellow teachers and parents	18.06 (2.15)	18.01 (1.96)	.05
Initiatives for program enrichment, knowledge dissemination, and teacher evaluation	19.72 (2.83)	19.34 (3.34)	1.74
Contribution to in-service training of staff and fund raising	12.79 (2.28)	13.61 (2.09)	15.89*

* $p < .05$.

Note: Higher scores indicate more important tasks/roles/skills.

items, which had their loadings on each factor. Higher scores indicated greater importance of a behaviour/role/skill for the SENCO.

MANOVA was carried out to determine differences in the five factors that were considered important for the SENCO according to special and general educators, as shown in Table 3. MANOVA showed that general educators considered the educational provision to students with SEN by the SENCO ($F_{(1,464)} = 37.97, p = .000$) and the contribution of SENCO to in-service training of staff and fund raising ($F_{(1,464)} = 15.89, p = .000$) as more important than special educators, who in turn placed more emphasis on the scientific and professional identity of the SENCO ($F_{(1,464)} = 6.31, p = .012$). There was no difference between special and general educators in the importance that they assign to SENCOs collaborating with fellow teachers and parents ($F_{(1,464)} = .05, p = .826$) and their initiatives for program enrichment, knowledge dissemination, and teacher evaluation ($F_{(1,464)} = 1.74, p = .188$).

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the way Greek general and special education teachers perceive the role and the daily function of SENCOs, in order for the necessary educational policy measures and the appropriate teacher training choices to be delineated, thus contributing to the successful introduction of this professional specialization in the Greek educational system. The details of SENCOs' multi-level role were examined (a) on the basis of answers given by the participants to open questions regarding caseload, time, and specialization issues, and (b) in the context of the following five factors, which were identified through factor analysis as underlying the SENCO questionnaire: (i) educational provision to students with SEN, (ii) scientific and professional identity, (iii) collaboration with fellow teachers and parents, (iv) initiatives for program enrichment, knowledge dissemination, and teacher evaluation, and (v) contribution to in-service training of staff and fund raising.

In reference to the issue of caseload, Greek general educators suggest that each SENCO should be responsible for 8 students on average, and should teach each one of them approximately 7 h per week. This suggestion probably reflects the impact of the operation of Resource Rooms on the way Greek teachers think about the role of SENCOs. Resource Rooms constitute, for 25 years now, the main form of support for students with SEN in the context of Greek general schools. Although only a relatively small portion of schools have Resource Rooms, it is common knowledge among Greek teachers that the caseload of each Resource Room teacher ranges from 3 to 12 students, who visit the Resource Room for a maximum of 15 h per week (official specifications of the recent law 3699/2008 on Special Education). An explanation, then, of Greek general educators' aspect regarding SENCO's caseload may be that they perceive this role similar to the Resource Room teacher's role. In contrast, the suggestion of special educators for a smaller, than 8, caseload for each SENCO, may be a function of the disappointment

and the stress often experienced by many of them, when realizing that they do not possess the necessary knowledge and skills to cope with the multiple SEN of the students they have been assigned to teach, due to insufficient undergraduate and specialization studies (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008). Official regulations or practice reality, leading to high "special teacher – student with SEN" ratios and to subsequent insufficient instructional support for students with SEN, have created problems also in other educational systems (e.g. Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001; Forlin, 2001). Hence, although the creation of definite role descriptions and the pursue of role generalizations is regarded as unrealistic, due to the variations in SENCO's work circumstances (e.g. Abbott, 2007; Szwed, 2007), the present authors believe that the idea should be carefully considered, to offer schools official guidelines regarding the number of students that should be directly taught by each SENCO, and the total hours that should be devoted to this teaching. Absence of such guidelines may have as a result a tremendous diversity in the daily function of SENCOs working at different parts of the country, which would inhibit both the exchange of information among them, regarding the specifics of their daily practice, and their in-serving training by the State.

In reference to the crucial issue of SENCOs' total working time, it was found that the hours Greek teachers believe a SENCO should spend in each school for fulfilling all his/her duties (assessing and teaching students, collaborating with other educators and parents etc), by far exceed the highest amount foreseen by the law for any Greek teacher (which is 25 h for newly appointed primary teachers, and lessens according to seniority). It could be inferred that, in line with the position of Teachers' Confederation of Greece, as well as with the educational policy in other countries (e.g. Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001; DfES, 2001), both general and special educators believe that each Greek school should have a fulltime SENCO. Reports from educational systems, with an extensive experience in the specifics of SENCOs' function, show that the amount and the allocation of SENCOs' working hours often create tensions and frictions (e.g. Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001; Cowne, 2003; MacKenzie, 2007). It is obvious that serious deliberation on the time issue must precede SENCOs' introduction to the system, as apart from the problems resulting from SENCOs' complex role per se, difficulties may arise from the Greek regulations on teachers' working conditions (e.g. will the scheme of lessening working hours according to seniority apply in the case of SENCOs, and by whom will they be substituted?). Leaving this issue to be dealt with according to local circumstances may lead either to SENCOs' substitution by inexperienced educators or to insufficient fulfillment of SENCOs' duties.

Regarding SENCOs' specialization, it was found that Greek general and special education teachers seem not to differ in the way they approach this issue. A rather marginal majority of both groups believes that SENCOs should be able to deal with all types of SEN. Several other countries have opted for this solution, mainly due to administrative reasons, and despite the opposition of SENCOs, who have repeatedly expressed their doubts as to the effectiveness of

their role when dealing with very diverse cases (e.g. MacKenzie, 2007; Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001). In the present authors' opinion, apart from the administrative reasons that might be claimed in any educational system and may, certainly, apply also in the case of Greece, there are two idiosyncratic reasons of the Greek reality that should be considered in the explanation of this finding: (a) Teachers' unfamiliarity with single-categorical or non-categorical specialization, as officially in Greece all undergraduate programs of studies in University Departments or programs of in-service training schools for special education teachers are of a multi-categorical nature. (b) Teachers' fear that acquiring a specialization in teaching one or few specific categories of students with SEN may in effect lead to the selling out of a highly appreciated privilege Greek teachers enjoy as civil servants. Being all employed by the Ministry of Education, Greek teachers have the right to ask, almost every other year, to be transferred from the school they are in any other school of the country that better serves their familial, social or personal needs, adducing different kinds of reasons. Specialization in one disability category would restrict Greek SENCOS' chances to be transferred to a school of their choice, as not all schools would necessarily have students with the exact SEN in which each SENCO would be specialized. On the other hand, it should be noted that in the experience of Greek special educators, teaching in multi-category classrooms ranks as the first source of their professional burnout (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008). This fact may explain the strong minority that supported SENCOS' specialization in one or few SEN categories. Perhaps a decision to have a number of SENCOS specialized in mild disabilities, and others specialized in the severe ones, as it happens in some countries (e.g. Forlin, 2001) would offer a functional happy medium.

Regarding the key factors defining SENCOS' role in daily school function, Greek general educators seem to lay more emphasis than special educators on the first factor, namely on issues pertinent to SENCOS' educational provision to students with SEN. Keeping of records on students with SEN, monitoring the progress of students with SEN and updating general educators and parents on it, deciding on the educational placement of students with SEN, and preparing the activities that educators need to teach children with SEN, are regarded by general educators as important duties of SENCOS. It could be argued that these preferences may reflect the idea that everything related to students with SEN should be SENCOS' responsibility, as it has been up to now the case with Resource Room teachers. It is worth mentioning that the above – mentioned obligations are included in SENCOS' workload in the countries where this educational specialty already exists (e.g. Crowther et al., 2001). As Emanuelsson (2001) points out, if SENCOS are left alone in their endeavors to fulfill these obligations, then, they can be easily marginalized, and so will be students with SEN and the whole inclusion movement. Hence, it is critical that the other members of the staff regard these obligations as a shared responsibility, and to this end specific measures in terms of educational policy and teacher training have to be taken.

When it comes to the responsibility for the diagnosis and teaching of students with SEN, general educators express more emphatically than special ones the opinion that SENCOS themselves should undertake it. This opinion may be explained by general educators' desire to have in their school someone who would be designated to go about these specialized activities, and who will not just give them vague instructions, like the ones they get from the Centers for Differential Diagnosis, Assessment, and Support (Vagena, 2009). Another explanation might be general educators' difficulty to understand the new role of support teachers (e.g. Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001; Szwed, 2007). On the other hand, the fact that special educators take on the issues of diagnosis and teaching of children with SEN the same view as the general ones,

although not so emphatically, may be explained by their desire not to abandon the "face-to-face" work that characterized the special needs teacher's work, when they will act as SENCOS themselves (Crowther et al., 2001).

Both general and special educators seem to regard as belonging to SENCOS' educational obligations the provision of support to students with SEN even beyond school, although the place of this function on the list of educational duties is rather low. Actual teaching at home is usually not considered as part of SENCOS role in other educational systems, but on the other hand, SENCOS themselves support the view that gathering information from a wide range of sources including those external to the school, in order to better meet their obligations, belongs to the procedures that they should employ in daily practice (Kearns, 2005). The degree to which this finding is in line with the respective practice in other systems depends on the exact nature of SENCOS function beyond school.

On the other hand, Greek general and special educators' opinion that writing of individualized educational plans (IEP) certainly belongs to SENCOS educational obligations, but does not rank high in the respective list, is rather in contrast to the reality of SENCOS' role in the countries where this institution already exists (e.g. Cole, 2005; MacKenzie, 2007; Weiner, 2003). Perhaps this is due to the fact that, although IEPs are mandatory in Greece, in practice the number of students with fully developed IEPs remains extremely low, due to several reasons (Vagena, 2009). Many Greek teachers, then, are not familiar with the role and the function of IEPs; hence, they may have underestimated their importance.

Regarding the second key factor of SENCOS' role, the scientific and professional identity, a clear majority (2/3) of both general and special education teachers supported the view that SENCOS should have training in both general and special education. This suggestion is in line with the position of Teachers' Confederation of Greece that special education teachers should firstly qualify as general educators (e.g. Teacher's Confederation, 2007). Presently in Greece there are two ways for someone to become a special educator: (a) first study at a Pedagogical Department and then follow a two –year in-service training course for becoming a certified SEN teacher, and (b) study directly Special Education in one of the two University Departments offering such courses. Similar schemes for someone to become a special educator can be found in other countries too (e.g. Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001). In educational systems in which SENCOS already exist, there is a variety in SENCOS' qualifications, with the common element being the qualification in supporting students with SEN (e.g. NUT, 2004). Nonetheless, it is underlined that SENCOS should be familiar with the specifics of the general school, either through an official program of studies or through teaching experience, in order to be able to cope with the position's demands (e.g. Szwed, 2007). Moreover, it should be noted that in a centrally organized educational system like the Greek one, in which duties and salaries are defined by the Ministry of Education, which is the authority hiring the school personnel of all specialties, professional inequalities create frictions and misunderstandings and should be avoided.

SENCOS' qualification, specifically in special educational needs, is a primary concern for decision makers in many educational systems, as research shows that the effectiveness of SENCOS who have undertaken a post without being certified SEN teachers is often restricted by the diminished credibility and respect of colleagues (MacKenzie, 2007). Attending only occasional courses, seminars or short-term in-service trainings certainly helps SENCOS be in touch with the developments in the field, but does not give them the expertise and the authority needed, not to just work with their colleagues but to guide them (Crowther et al., 2001; Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001). It can be argued, then, that Greek teachers' strong

opinion that SENCOs should be qualified SEN educators and also have training in teaching typical students is in the right direction, and should be taken into consideration by policy makers. Strongly supported by Greek general and special educators (especially by the latter ones) is also the idea that SENCOs should (a) try systematically to be updated about the developments in their field, (b) participate in scientific conferences, and (c) collaborate with other experts for improving their knowledge and practical skills. These findings are in line with findings from other Greek studies (e.g. Koutrouba, Vamvakari, & Theodoropoulos, 2008), and also with common functions of SENCOs in several of the educational systems in which they have been already introduced (e.g. Emanuelsson, 2001; Szwed, 2007).

Both general and special educators seem to believe that SENCOs should have a specific and publicized timetable and that they should be responsible for liaising with mental health professionals. These beliefs may be the result of Greek teachers present dissatisfaction from their collaboration with the members of the personnel of the Centers for Differential Diagnosis, Assessment, and Support, who (a) visit the schools for evaluating students according to their own, tight and not always known to the teachers, schedule, and (b) tend to overwhelm teachers with information expressed in a technical language, which cannot be easily “translated” in concrete pedagogical measures (Vagena, 2009). Thus, the feeling is created in teachers that they are actually unaided when it comes to urgent and demanding cases of students with SEN. Obviously, teachers would feel more secure if a prospective law referring to the specifics of SENCOs’ duties foresaw that they should be obliged to make their timetable known to all agencies they collaborate with, and that they should be responsible for converting their own and other experts’ conclusions and proposals in information accessible by teachers and parents.

The fact that special educators seem to lay more emphasis than their general counterparts, on the dimensions of the second factor defining SENCOs role in daily school practice, which is scientific and professional identity, may be explained by the fact that many of them may in the future work as SENCOs, and as they are familiar with the demands of special education, they feel how important it is for SENCOs to be trained as effectively as possible.

In reference to the third factor of SENCOs’ function, collaborating with fellow teachers and parents, Greek general and special educators regard as important elements of SENCO’s profile (a) the ability to make informed decisions on specific cases of students with SEN, after discussing the issue with general educators, (b) the ability to act as an agent between parties with opposing views, and (c) the ability to closely work with teachers and families and counsel them. Regarding the direct interaction between general educators and SENCOs, Greek general and special educators believe that there should be a constant collaboration between the two parties for exchanging information about students with SEN. Specifically, both general and special educators seem to coincide in their belief that SENCOs should discuss with the rest of the staff all issues pertinent to students with SEN, and listen to their ideas, although it should be the SENCOs’ responsibility to make the final decisions and counsel their colleagues respectively. The ability to deal successfully with situations in which opposing views are expressed by colleagues or colleagues and parents, as well as the ability to effectively counsel teachers and parents are, obviously, essential for SENCOs in coping with their daily obligations. These qualities have been characterized as “horizontal channels of influence” as opposed to “hierarchical channels”, namely channels created by positional power (York-Barr et al., 2005). In order for these qualities to be fully developed and the influence exerted through them to be productive, SENCOs should have well-developed interpersonal skills (Szwed, 2007), which should not merely derive from a charisma, but should be the product of specialized

training. In selecting SENCOs and training them, decisions makers should seriously consider these elements.

Regarding Greek teachers opinion that SENCOs should be willing to sacrifice personal time for fulfilling their duties, it is probably a product of dissatisfaction, or even indignation, felt by many Greek teachers who had to wait for months until they receive information on their students, who had been referred to and evaluated by the CDDAS, due to organizational inadequacies and heavy workloads of the Centers. This suggestion may also be a function of the fact that all Greek special education teachers receive an allowance, which most likely the participants of this research assumed that would be given to SENCOs too. An allowance means for many people more responsibilities, which the receivers of the allowance should be ready to go about even in their personal time. It is obvious, that the suggestion about personal time stresses the need for careful deliberation of the SENCOs’ workload issue. It is imperative that this workload remains manageable; otherwise there may be considerable frictions in the schools which will be to the detriment of students with SEN (e.g. Gross, 2008). Regarding SENCOs’ evaluative role, both general and special educators seem not to appreciate the idea that SENCOs might act as general teachers’ evaluators in reference to the teaching of students with SEN. They, obviously, envision SENCOs as colleagues, counselors, and users of the “horizontal” and not the “hierarchical” channels of influence.

In reference to the fourth dimension of SENCOs’ function, initiatives for program enrichment, knowledge dissemination, and teacher evaluation, both general and special educators were found to believe strongly that SENCOs should (a) give often lectures to inform parents and staff on the latest developments in the field of SEN, (b) implement in school pilot programs not only for academic learning, but also for the socialization of students with SEN, (c) organize activities for the promotion of social inclusion of students with SEN, and (d) be open to suggestions for new approaches to existing problems. The first suggestion, giving lectures, is regarded in Greece as social responsibility of experts; it is expected, then, by the teachers that SENCOs, as experts, will undertake initiatives to disseminate information on their field of expertise. The second and the third of the above-mentioned suggestions characterize, to a large extent, the way SENCOs function in several of the educational systems in which they have been already introduced (e.g. Cole, 2005; Emanuelsson, 2001; Szwed, 2007; Weiner, 2003). Hence, Greek policy makers and teacher trainers should consider them seriously. The 4th suggestion may be a reflection of educators negative experience with one-sided solutions to complex issues pertaining SEN; it may also be the result of their belief that SENCOs should have a constant interest to widen their knowledge and skills level, and not become authoritative; finally, this suggestion may be mirroring the idea that SENCOs should try to share the responsibility for the decisions they need to make with the educators. All four suggestions underline the need for the adoption of high standards in the process of SENCOs’ training.

In reference to the fifth dimension of SENCOs’ role, contribution to the in-service training of staff and fund raising, Greek educators seem to believe that SENCOs should employ exemplary instructions of students with SEN in order to familiarize their general school colleagues with innovative teaching methods. General education teachers express this opinion more emphatically than their special education counterparts, probably due to the lack of pertinent knowledge, to the recognition of SENCOs’ leading role, and to the fact that exemplary instructions are generally appreciated by Greek teachers as an effective means for introducing new methods and approaches (Agaliotis et al., 2009).

Moreover, general educators strongly express the view that SENCOs should not only train them regularly in teaching students with SEN, but also provide them with the materials needed for the

implementation of the instruction. These beliefs should be examined under the light of research findings showing that in many educational systems the transition from the role of “special needs teacher”, who is solely responsible for specific students with SEN, to the role of SENCO, who should develop a whole-school perspective of inclusion, cannot be easily achieved (e.g. Pijl & Van den Bos, 2001; Szwed, 2007). In order for general educators to develop ownership of the education of their students with SEN and to be actively involved in supporting them in their effort to participate in all curricular activities, many systematic efforts should be implemented in the form of weekly meetings and common projects between SENCOs and their colleagues (Szwed, 2007). These issues should be dealt with prior to the introduction of SENCOs in the Greek educational system, as its peculiarities in decision-making and enforcement of educational policy may cause problems in the SENCOs' integration in the system.

Regarding fund raising, Greek educators take the view that SENCOs should be responsible for ensuring funding from governmental and other sources. It could be argued that, as in the case of maintaining school's SEN register, keeping the records on students with SEN, monitoring their progress, and informing their parents on it, the opinion of Greek general educators regarding SENCOs' role in securing funding may reflect the idea that everything related to students with SEN should be the responsibility of the SENCO. In other educational systems SENCOs play a role in fund raising (e.g. Szwed, 2007), but in Greece things are different as (a) governmental resources are traditionally allocated by central authorities according to complex criteria, and (b) there is no tradition for other sectors of public life to contribute to educational expenses, as school function is regarded both by law and the Greek educational tradition as an exclusive obligation of the State.

The “picture” that comes out of this study can inform the decisions on SENCO's role in the Greek educational system, and can contribute to the minimization of the obstacles inherent in the process of introducing this new professional specialty in any educational system bearing common characteristics to the Greek one.

Future research could go about the needs of teachers of rural schools or schools on islands, and explore the way SENCOs could be introduced in this part of the Greek educational system. Another part of the educational system that should be investigated as to the perspectives of SENCOs introduction is secondary education. Moreover, given that data for the present study were collected only through surveys with educators, future studies might want to explore also the opinions of student bodies or governmental agencies that might identify other aspects of SENCOs' function that have not been pointed out so far or to include also qualitative methods of data collection.

4.1. Conclusion

The introduction of SENCOs in an educational system should not be regarded as compensation for the system's inadequate infrastructure and insufficient resources or for the inefficiencies of its personnel. SENCOs will be effective in meeting the needs of students with SEN and their families, only if they have a manageable role with unambiguous responsibilities and clear rights. Successful introduction of SENCOs in a system presupposes the familiarization of all involved parties with the true nature and the daily function of SENCOs, with an emphasis on the strategic – coordinating dimension of their role.

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