A STUDY REGARDING GREEK TEACHERS DURING ECONOMIC AUSTERITY

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Abstract:

This article deals with teachers' feelings about teaching through their personal beliefs and experiences. We tried to reveal the relationship between some of the factors operating in the context of a teacher's work, the constraints on her/his freedom of action and judgement, teachers' classroom practice and the possible rewards and the stresses that s/he experiences every day during economic austerity measures. It looks at the teacher as a person as well as a professional. The previously mentioned targets are undertaken through semi-structured (e-mail) interviews with teachers during 2015-2016 and are based on the main idea of our Master's thesis (we asked the same questions to teachers nowadays). The common ground and the differences across respondents' answers are identified.

Keywords: teaching, economic austerity, Greek education

Introduction

«There have been many steps in understanding teaching and the parameters that jointly shape it. At the same time it is acknowledged that no analysis, however systematic it may be, cannot fully attribute [...] the personality called "teacher"»

(Papanaoum, 2003: 40).

Teaching is not a perfunctory procedure and being a teacher/educator is not an easy job. Teachers' voices could have been heard more (Majumdar, 2011 and see also Elbaz, 2005). We tried to give teachers the opportunity to express themselves, talk freely about the experiences and relate these personal experiences to events and their context in

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between economic crisis. From this main speculation derived the questions that were used in the interviews that have been held. The questions asked are the same questions that we asked about one decade ago for the research that we conducted for our Master's thesis to teachers. We thought that it would be of great interest to ask the same questions to other teachers some years after, in the heart of economic crisis for Greece.

Teachers' feelings and professional profile

Dusek, Hall and Meyers' (1985) expectancy theory defined teacher's aspirations, as well as students' resultant effort to attain those aspirations. Bruner also (1982) writes that the confluence point between emotions, cognition and action is the culture (or, according to others, the social environment) and defines the conditions under which persons formulate their emotions, desires, actions, and behaviour in general. The aspirations and expectations of teachers and students, the need for learning, and the environment, constitute therefore elements that directly affect the teaching process. In concordance to the above, Moyles, Suschitzky and Chapman wrote (1998) that the relationship between teachers and pupils is formed by the different social contexts, in which every part of this relationship lives reality.

Apart from the reality regarding the relationship between teachers and pupils, there is also in-classroom reality. Teachers face complex in-classroom situations and need to interpret all kind of possible meanings directly and, also be aware of '*teaching never equals learning*' (Doverborg and Pramling, 1996: 44). In the teacher-pupil interaction the teacher should assert her/his role in keeping up an environment suitable for her/him to teach and in which the individual pupils will operate with respect towards each other and towards the educator. This is not always easy and the teachers should possess competences which will allow them to manage in-classroom environment (see Marton, 1980). A classroom is a place where the teacher and the pupils function as a group. That means that teachers trying to teach in a better way have to reflect firstly upon themselves and their performance (Baird, in Russell and Munby, 1995).

Teaching is not what we think it is or what we see that it is (see Clark and Peterson, 1986). One could claim that they are restricted and "imprisoned" in a background (professionalism). Teacher professionalism has been a precarious matter; when we think of teachers, we have to consider the governments, the bureaucracies that arise around them and during the educational procedure (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996). Government claims that a teacher should always work for the curriculum, but what actually happens is the redirection of the teachers' job (Papanaoum, 2003).

Teachers' low social and professional image should be examined in conjunction with the stereotypical ideas of the Greek professional structure. As Pirgiotakis (1992) mentions, the higher the socioeconomic the background of the person is, the lower the respect s/he has for the teaching profession.

It should be considered that teachers are being criticized in to as a professional group and not as individuals, fact which seems to be perfectly normal for every other professional. Teachers are trapped in the ethics of their work code (deriving from the state) and end up facing dilemmas concerning the conflict between their personal goals and their dependent work relation (Paraskevopoulou – Kollia, 2009).

Methodology

This small-scale study was based on interviews with Greek teachers, enquiring about their perspectives and feelings on teaching. It reflects the research that was held on 2015-2016. We thought that it would be necessary to view the above mentioned in the contemporary context, Greek austerity, ceteris paribus. In order to do that we asked some questions to ten Greek, nursery and primary, school teachers. It is important to note that the results cannot be generalized –due to the small sample-, but there are some interesting findings that we believe are worth mentioning.

Semi-structured interviews

Oppenheim (1992) has written that interviewing is 'art', which demands the meaning of words such as adaptability, graciousness, and truthfulness, but also flexibility, creativity and friendliness. Interviews in general give the ability to reveal and approach people's individual conceptualizations and are the most 'common and powerful way' to comprehend people's thinking (Fontana and Frey, 1994: 361). In this research we used semi-structured (e-mail) interviews. They were taken from May 2015 to May 2016. Semi-structured interviews are low-cost and they can appear to be a rapid method for gathering information from individuals (Meho, 2006; Blomberg, et al., 1993).

> *"Semi-structured interview schedule acknowledges that not every word has the same meaning to every respondent and not every respondent uses the same vocabulary."*
>
> (Treece and Treece, in Barriball and While, 1994: 330)

Finally, mistrust or trust between the researcher and the interviewee is always interlinked and therefore, by introducing an element of our own personal experiences,

we confirm that the imperative need for a researcher to remain neutral and objective is not always possible to meet (See also Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 12).

Using semi-structured e-mail Interviews

Semi-structured e-mail interviews have the possibility to give access to world-wide samples simultaneously (Meho, 2006; Coomber, 1997). The researcher has the opportunity to 'eliminate any errors introduced through in correct transcription' and work on the exact words the respondent wrote (http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU21.html, Selwyn and Robson, 1998) fact requiring little changes on 'editing or formatting before they are processed for analysis' (Meho, 2006). E-mail interviews give the opportunity to the respondents to answer when they feel they want to, being 'calm and without tension' (Olivero and Lunt, 2004: 104), but time of response may be an element that plays crucial role (see also Kivits, 2005). An immediate response pre-requires being in a good mood for participating in the research and feeling secured (see also Meho, 2006). If it takes long to respond the possibility of not participating or even be frustrated –both the interviewer and the interviewee- could be a reality (Hodgson, 2004).

The sample

The sample consisted of primary and nursery teachers. There were in total ten persons. All interviews were taken via e-mail. The time chosen for the interviews was decided after telephoning or e-mailing them. All teachers who were interviewed accepted at once to be involved in the research.

Teachers were chosen due to our personal experience that they are the ones whose social image is not highly appreciated (since they deal with infants and young children) (see also Korzcak, in Hoegemann, 2000: 54).

We knew most of the teachers quite well and they introduced us to their colleagues, so as to interview them, as well, so no fear, or hesitation, appeared through the interviews via e-mails. No event that needs to be highlighted was spotted.

Language affecting problems

The answers were in Greek and, in fact, there were some difficulties in transferring and analysing the exact meaning of the words spoken. Some terms could not be accurately translated. We tried to analyse the given data through being as accurate as possible; through presenting the respondents' points of view and expression.

Findings

Discussion

The findings of this study have come from interviews that took place from May 2015 to May 2016. The interview schedule comprises of twelve questions, which refer to teachers' feelings and experience through teaching. The analysis and comparison is made between emotions, experiences, stresses, rewards, viewpoints and opinions expressed and felt by teachers, in relation to each question. Each respondent gave their own unique and personal answers, even though similarities were not uncommon.

To sum up, Filias (1994) has written that the answers, which derive from sciences, are always hypothetical. Trochim (2002) has mentioned that we have the tendency to generalise even though we usually contact individuals and, what we should never forget is the fact that we are human beings and we interpret what we study under our own theoretical and empirical prism. This small scale research is aware of that; we tried not to homogenise and generalise the data and seeked to offer to the reader a deeper understanding of the real meaning of teaching, via every-day life experience and economic austerity (by trying to expel our personal attitude from the data's analysing procedure).

1.   Defining teaching (Could you, please, give me your definition of what teaching is?)

Teachers talked about communication, transmission of knowledge, behaviour. They defined teaching as a complex procedure that combines theoretical knowledge and techniques, which help themselves, apart from their pupils. But teaching is not only communication and 'warm' experiences; it is also demanding and ambiguous regarding the teaching material. They underlined that since 2010 Greece is in austerity and this could not be underestimated for their profession and their everyday life.

- o   In the recent years, the ailing economy is taking its toll on teachers, who feel morally and financially devalued. However, the overwhelming majority continue to endeavour to deliver better teaching.
- o   The response could be multi-dimensional. I will limit it around the "definition" that underpins my own effort with my students: teaching within the framework of an education system is the organised, systematic effort by adults to support their children as the latter are growing up, both at academic level (at least with regard to the subjects that we regard as important – the range of which is beyond the scope of this article), as well as at the level of personal and social skills. The objective is to make the children feel safe and capable of learning, both within the

class and in the wider context of the school; to empower them to move on, beyond their starting points. Of course, this process is of learning value also to me, an adult teaching professional.

o Teaching is the transfer of knowledge and skills from teacher to student. During recent years, this procedure continues but the economic reality absorbs teachers' empowerment, and so, they feel morally and economically degraded… the majority tries hard for the best teaching.

o To teach is to transfer knowledge, behaviours and skills, to train the children's critical abilities and to cultivate their beliefs and life views. However, I feel disappointed and anxious with the latest political events, which will inevitably affect the way my job is done.

2 and 3. Understanding children's learning process (How do you think children -of the age group you teach- learn? How do you understand when a child has learned something?)

Within the framework of answering these questions, teachers mentioned that children learn through experience, through acting upon things, observing; individuality and personality crucial role in learning. However, the most important criterion for learning is its post-cognitive utilization, i.e. children's ability to use and explain what they have learnt. Teachers also mentioned the eye 'signals' received from their pupils; they referred to the information that they gain from pupils' eyes.

The following remarks made by respondents are worth noting:

o If s/he can explain to the teacher or a classmate then that means that s/he has completely conquered knowledge.

o Considering whether the information that I offer s/he can properly use it her/his daily life.

o It depends on the learning object and the target that I set by teaching it.

o When working on something new, I pay attention to children's eyes and the expression of their faces. Also, in some subjects I may be coming back often with questions / exercises etc., the answers to which we associate with the past, helping us to move to new knowledge and to identify what we understand and what not. Based on my observations, I plan my route and I rate (in large classes of primary school).

o The questions that children make help me a lot; due to them I understand to what extent they have reached an understanding. Regarding the most introverted and weak children, I ask them privately and discreetly either in the

classroom or during the brakes. From their response, primarily, and, secondarily, from what they say, I jump to my conclusions.

- o I check if the child manifests the learned object in everyday life, in the classroom, in her/his relationship with the members of our team etc.
- o From their eyes… also, if her/his attitude regarding the desired direction, if s/he seems more certain in actions that we do in the classroom…

4. Ability and willingness of matching teaching to children's needs (How far are you able to match your teaching to their needs?)

Teachers' answers referred to the need of communicating and interacting with pupils. But they also referred to the relative autonomy that they gain because of the curriculum and because of the minimum means that they have during teaching. One teacher mentioned that sometimes it seems difficult to handle situations in which teaching profession and teachers are undermined; the fact is that during economic austerity families feel they have to express dissatisfaction and the easiest way to do it is to respond negatively to people who are civil servants and easily accessible, so as teachers (see also Clwyd and Hart, 2013, Lipsky, 2010).

- o The curriculum does not leave much room for that to happen, since it is still not flexible; the only exception may be the pre-school (nursery) education where there is some flexibility.
- o I try to be flexible with the few means available to me because of the crisis, creating the best possible learning conditions.
- o The predominant - for me - point of nowadays is to challenge, in part of the parents, the political leadership of the dominant media and other factors of the public 'speech', to teachers and their profession. Expression of questioning is very often rudely and violently shown (complaints, use of force, etc.), with slanders and threats against teachers. The formidable position of many families due to unemployment, financial difficulties, fear etc. adversely affects children, who carry this climate at school. We, teachers, are not always able to handle such situations, as we do not have the appropriate training, thereby another difficulty in the accomplishment of our work is added. Support we have certainly not, in order to manage our own burnout, caused by a quite demanding, stressful and multifaceted profession and which is being intensified this period due to financial difficulties and the conditions that compose what we call "crisis".
- o I try every day to listen to my students' needs and to adapt the teaching to their requirements and not to the Ministry of Education's curriculum requirements, without getting away from a certain context.

5. Differentiation and behaviour in school 'atmosphere' (How do you manage classroom behaviour?)

On classroom management, teachers talked about light penalties and rules that have to be settled from the very beginning of the school year. More specifically, teachers mentioned the calmness and patience needed in order to manage children misbehaving. Being positive with the children and developing a good relationship with them helps the educator identify the problem and distract the child from it. Apart from that element a teacher has to be firm on what s/he says and responsible about what s/he agrees with the students. Actions do 'have consequences' and a teacher has to follow this path in 'making students responsible and accountable for their actions' (Stipek, in Jacobsen, Eggen and Kauchak, 2008: 45).

Children have to consider that their freedom is simultaneously their obligations. Communication and especially dialogue that is aimed towards understanding identity development, helps each child manoeuvre and work with her/his different backgrounds in individual ways in the classroom environment. A communication that is intended to be dialogic should above all offer the child respect as well as encouragement to identify and develop her/his abilities and express problematic situations which are able to distract the teaching procedure. This may then work to build up the children's self-esteem and inner-psychological links (Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, 2004: 41). After all, classrooms mirror society and there is always in existence a corresponding relationship between social scheming and school, which remains the main vehicle of socialization (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

- With discussion mainly, but also with strict recommendations and reprimands.
- Discussing democratically we define acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and as regards the case of the latter we discuss all together how we can solve the problem.
- One of the very basic and useful procedures at the beginning of the school year is to make the policy of our class ("What I want from this school year:", "what can I do to accomplish it?"), to the help them shape and reinforce both team spirit and the sense of belonging to a community of people where one takes care of her/himself and the other team members. Also, by giving them space for expression (in the Flexible Zone, but also when we work the other subjects) through experiential activities, group work and different ways of working -with painting, pantomime, role play, new technologies etc.
- In general, I give priority to the formulation of an educational climate that helps them to feel good in a place where they can talk, decide on the issues that concern them and so it makes sense to participate. I believe that via this path I

have time to comprehend most of the behavioural problems that are manifested from some bored children, who they do not like reading and mental work and have other –outside school- concerns, who are shy or "excessive" confidence etc.

- o In any case, with perseverance, a lot of patience, disposal to listen, but also by setting the required limits.
- o I am strict, but every time I explain to children why they should be quiet and disciplined, without yelling, threats and punishments, using dialogue and argumentation.

6. Distinctions between children (Do you make distinctions between the children?)

Teachers said that they make distinctions between children even though they try not to, because it is difficult to avoid it. They make distinctions when they have to differentiate teaching material. To this question, we only quote one answer, because it is characteristic, analytic and highlighted that the teacher tries hard to be accurate and fair and any differentiations made are made on teaching methods-strategies and not on behaviour towards children.

- o My goal is not to make a distinction as regards my behaviour towards children, meaning not to neglect any child, give every day opportunities to everyone, regardless of gender, religion, social or economic situation (etc.), encourage and reward regardless of their school performance. I make distinctions when I have to differentiate the teaching material which is used in my teaching: i.e. customize worksheets, videos etc. in 'weak' students, i.e. with gaps in mathematics or fewer skills in language, or to support children escaping upwards from 'average' to more demanding training material or wish to prepare for exams in secondary schools. In short, I am interested in ensuring all my students that I'm there for all of them. And because our classes are –have always been- heterogeneous in many aspects, we need differentiations in teaching, but not differentiations as regards our behaviour towards children.

7. Showing affection to children (How do you show affection?)

Teachers commonly show affection with every expression that comes into their mind, by understanding and communicating, by even touching gently and very carefully ('dangerous times') as regards also children's age and gender. Kamii (1998) has written that there is no other way of communicating with the pupils apart from trying unstoppably to transfer your meaning to them. The question arising from this

viewpoint is who could define which is the best way of communicating and being expressive, in order to show affection to children. That is not an easily answered question.

- o With both verbal (positive feedback, praise) and physical contact (touch on the head, back or to the students' shoulders, dangerous times indeed).
- o If they are experiencing learning or personal - emotional problem, I discreetly dedicate the necessary time to help them overcome.
- o With gestures, such as plaiting the girls' hair, patting they boys' head, using encouraging words, rewarding and supporting ones such as "my love.." "my girl.." "let's go my boy/ lad, keep trying!" "Who am I going to tease, you guys, now that I won't be seeing you for 15 days?" with hugs and kisses, with teasing, with acknowledgements like "I'm lucky to have you as my students… you are the reason I come to work with a smile on my face' e.t.c.
- o I talk sweetly to children, do humour, but avoid to touch (me first), because it's at an age which mainly boys are embarrassed; they are becoming men. With the girls I am more effusive.

8. Criteria of judging the 'self', considering educational process (Do you judge yourself? With which criteria?)

Teachers insisted on the relation they have with their pupils being the fair judge regarding their self-judgment. The most important criterion of 'self-judgement' for teachers is the knowledge that pupils have gained after each day in school and their will to go back to it. Judging the 'self' also includes an ethical part, which is important for every educator. They can see the response from children and they keep building from what they have learnt. Understanding the child's developmental knowledge is a prerequisite for regulating the educational praxis and acting upon its basis (Bruner, 1982). All teachers who have been interviewed quoted that pupils' emotions and responses are the starting points for evaluation of themselves and since they are closely involved with them (the pupils), pupils' judgments matter to them.

- o I judge myself via children's willingness to come to school. This is the first criterion. Secondly I judge myself by understanding how much all children are capable of taking part in the learning process without any discrimination.
- o Regarding the learning part I judge myself based on results that children show in the written and oral tests and as regards the pedagogical part by checking my relationships with my students and their relationships between them and feeding them back.

o Yes, I evaluate my work on a daily and longer term, starting by the aims I set and the principles that I have as a teacher. Also, children's behaviour is another criterion: when something does not function well on that issue, I try to find whether I am responsible. Tests, worksheets are often on cognitive subjects. I ask my students to fill in a descriptive evaluation form at the end of each semester. What helps them, what needs to change on my teaching so as for them to be easier to study etc. I group their answers and we discuss it a lot, because you can imagine that they also write irrelevant things. Most of the times though their comments are helpful to me.

o Every day I judge myself. By trying to be scientifically adequate, calm and by showing my interest to children.

9. and 10. Classroom and home: is there a link between them? (When you go home, do you think of what has happened in the classroom? When you are in the classroom, do you think of what has happened at home?)

The ninth and tenth questions complement one another, since the first refers to the in-home situation and the next one to the vice-versa climate. Teachers said that they think about school, they dream about school, they discuss about school in their life outside it. On the opposite occasion, when they enter classroom, they forget about anything else. Teaching absorbs all their energy and thinking, with no exceptional viewpoints expressed.

o It concerns me -on daily basis- what has happened during the morning and I keep thinking what might went wrong, what right and what else could be done.

o Very much! Sometimes I even lose my sleep.

o Vey often!!!

o Some days, when something really tense happens, positive or negative, then yes, I think about it at home…

o Rarely there is time to think about other things when you are in the classroom.

o I always forget my personal 'issues' when I am in the class. I am in there and only there.

o I never think about anything else. My work and my students only absorb all the rest.

o Rarely. When I think about something else it happens either in the break or be the end of the school program. But in any case not when I am with the children.

"It is virtually impossible to manage a classroom or succeed in any part of teaching without genuinely caring about students and their learning"

(Jacobsen, Eggen and Kauchak, 2008: 44).

11. Stresses during educational procedures (Do you believe that teaching is a stressful job?)

The eleventh question was one of the most essential to be asked, because stress is one of the matters that teachers face very often on a daily basis (Burchielli and Bartram, 2006; Chrysafidis, 1999). Teachers do face stress and according to what they answered there are many elements contributing to this. They referred to the preparation and to the balance between learning and sentimental objects and they also referred to the size of responsibility that they carry for each child's future (and even her/his physical health). Teaching is hard work, as mentioned previously, and even though teachers know that children are worth it, they cannot stop themselves from feeling stressed and lack of energy.

- o I believe that teaching is a very stressful and tiring job. I think that one can really dry up of energy.
- o Yes, it is very stressful trying to daily collateral children's learning and emotional balance and physical integrity…
- o For conscientious teachers, yes, our profession can be stressful. For the rest no.
- o It is a very stressful job because on daily basis you are firstly interested in your students' physical integrity and then teaching.

12. Gaining rewards from teaching (Do you believe that teaching is a rewarding job?)

Teachers admitted that teaching can be a very rewarding job. They mentioned that they are satisfied due to the relationship that they build with their pupils and they underlined the fact that one needs to like her/his profession in order to gain satisfaction from it. What teachers also mentioned is the fact that economic austerity nowadays in Greece has caused degradation to their social profile and 'technically' (in effect/ in practise) to their salaries.

- o No way. Especially at this period, it is humiliation what educators are going through.
- o It gives me great pleasure to see in children's eyes love and acceptance.
- o If you want to work as a professional, you care about your work etc., yew, the co-existence with children, sometimes, and the communication with their parents it rewards you. But if you do not love this job, you find only negative elements 'on' it…

o   Economically, no, it is not rewarding, but the feedback and love from children is my reward making me continue happily, even though the nowadays' harsh conditions that we are facing in Greece.

Having viewed the above mentioned attitudes, one thing that needs to be mentioned is that teachers that we talked to are focused on their profession and they ask themselves questions as to how they can put across knowledge and how knowledge is supposed to be put across/ transmitted as well as who this is defined by.

In the field of Philosophy of Education, as Aristotelis has stated about maturity, which derives from education, it is on the verge between development and decadence and is expressed and shown only in and for the community. Teachers are participants in children's education and they all try to develop mature people who will be strong and will have the ability to judge critically and to achieve their goals through free will, as far as this is possible. The aim of all these teachers, with whom we had the opportunity to discuss with, is, at least, about children's feeling good during school days. No one could deny that attitude.

Conclusion

Thirteen years after our first relevant research took place, we tried via this work to explore once again a view of teaching through Greek teachers' feelings, thoughts and actions (through the educational process). We asked the same questions to different teachers and on an almost totally different period, -socially and economically.

This conclusion will focus on the similarities and the differences between teachers' responses. Regarding the first question teachers shared similar viewpoints and concluded by declaring that teaching is communicating with pupils, encouraging them and offering them knowledge. What is essential to be mentioned is the fact that the nowadays teachers highlighted that teaching nowadays is not so easy, since the economic and political circumstances have created lot of difficulties and stress to them (element which is also revealed from their answers to the eleventh question).

Discussing further teachers follow the National Curriculum with slight changes, deal with frequent inspection and do not have to do paper work on a weekly basis. Considering this group of questions teachers shared similar points of view on the fact that they evaluate themselves based on what the pupils have gained after each day in school, how they respond in the classroom and then they build up from that point on. Teachers do judge themselves and their abilities and that causes them to be frustrated and experience more stress than normal (Leland and Harste, 2005).

Teachers said that they match their teaching to pupils' needs by bridging gaps and interacting with them and by paying personal attention to each pupil's efforts. The

responses revealed that the educational system formally-typically remains the same. Even though the answers were not similar, someone could claim that all teachers try to match their teaching to pupils' needs and that is the most essential and strong element. As regards the sixth question, teachers highlighted the fact that they try not to make discriminations between the pupils; one teacher mentioned that the important issue is not to make distinctions regarding the treatment. In managing classroom behaviour issue the answers given were similar. All teachers said that they try to be positive and to build the essential bridges between themselves and the pupils.

It is true, that during the latest years the profession of the teacher requires a constant renewal of one's knowledge and abilities in order to cope with the demands of an ever changing and fast progressing society (Anderson and Olsen, 2006; Burchielli and Bartram, 2006; Mialaret, 1974). All teachers share similar aspects on how they recognize they way learning comes about. The answers revealed that they gain important information by recognizing when the children gain knowledge through observing children's reactions and expression on a daily basis at school. As Novak (2010) has written Meaningful learning underlies the constructive integration of thinking, feeling, and acting leading to empowerment for commitment and responsibility (: 3) and to this process teachers play important role.

Summing up the conclusion, there still exist the need for in-service training and holistic programmes for teachers that will be relative to their needs. Though, introducing scientific developments in the large area of education and pedagogy training programmes would be inadequate if not accompanied by well-designed psychological and educative support material, in order to fight teachers' relatively low self (and social)-esteem.

"Teachers must be re-instated in the society as those who are to put into effect the ambitious plans of the educational planners and the politicians, while reforms for more frequent training, postgraduate studies and parents co-training must be secured"

(Palios and Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, 2012: 29)

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