Lifelong Learning and continuing education: Opinions of teachers and student teachers of preschool education in Greece

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ABSTRACT
In the following article we are going to present the findings of a qualitative research that uses semi-structured interviews for data collection. This specific research aims to look into the views of pre-school teachers (Pre-school Education) and student teachers (students of the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education) on the content and importance of lifelong learning and continuing education. At the same time the research compares the views of these two groups as regards lifelong learning and continuing education based on how these terms are coined in relevant literature. The findings show that there is no discrepancy in opinions as both groups consider lifelong learning and continuing education as the medium that will eventually help an educationalist improve both on personal as well as professional level.

Indexing terms/Keywords
Lifelong Learning, Continuing Education, Teachers, Preschool Education

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SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION
Lifelong Learning, Adult Education

TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)
Qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews)
INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that lifelong learning is multidimensional as regards its functionality and effect it has on education, culture, politics and society. In recent years lifelong learning has been increasingly promoted through reports of International Institutions throughout the European Union placing an emphasis on the continuing education of teachers and educationalists.

Until the end of the 1970s the term ‘Lifelong Learning’ was almost synonymous with the term ‘adult education’ (Himmelstrup, 1981). However, after the 1980s, references on the term Lifelong Learning were rapidly increasing (Legrand, 1989) with a special emphasis on the realization of the improvement of knowledge and skills of human resources concerning the constantly changing needs of economy. Moreover, a number of researchers support that the reason why they think this is very important is because there is a connection of Lifelong Learning and Education with the labor market and employment. Specifically, in 1996, a year that was dedicated to Lifelong Learning by the European Union, policy papers underline the priority of the financial dimensions of Lifelong Learning and Education over social and personal aspects of it.

Nowadays, people demand a lot from educationalists since teachers ought to be facilitators and educational expertise is a dead-end due to the fact that teachers ought to have multiple roles in the classroom. Considering the fact that opinions of teachers on Lifelong Learning and continuing professional training influence their attitudes and the decisions they make we attempted to delve deeper into the opinions of active teachers and student teachers. The research aims to outline the convergence and divergence of the opinions of the above mentioned groups.

THERORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Jarvis mentions that society as a complex social system is characterized by constant changes that lead to the increase of educational duration. There are constant and rapid changes and developments in technology. Since knowledge is infinite, if people desire to exist as entities inside their own civilization they would need to expand their knowledge. Lifelong learning and continuing education could contribute to a person’s adaption to cultural changes that govern society. Continuing education has greatly influenced work fields as we can observe the decrease of traditional forms of work and the accumulation of obsolete knowledge; as a result there is a need for expansion of knowledge and search of different forms of work and employment. Lifelong learning and continuing education is constantly mentioned due to the rapidly changing circumstances in modern societies which have led to the wide acceptance of the term (Jarvis, 2007). In modern reality, the concept of Lifelong Learning and continuing education is placed in the very center of the educational and research community.

As far as Lifelong Learning is concerned, UNESCO (1976) declares that it is a limitless scheme that aims to reform the existing educational system. Education and learning are not restricted by school education and they must extend throughout a person’s life, include all skills and branches of knowledge, utilize all possible means and give the opportunity to all individuals to fully develop their personality. All educational and learning processes with which children, young people and adults regardless of age are involved throughout their lives should be considered as a whole irrespective of the form they take (Karalis, 2009, p. 70). More specifically, to fully understand the terms Lifelong Learning and continuing education and all the planning processes they entail we need to refer to the concept of continuum. Lifelong Learning and continuing education is not at all restricted to adult education; on the contrary it is seen as a whole that includes all levels of education from pre-school education to tertiary education. Moreover, education does not come to an end when one completes formal education; it continues for the rest of one’s life.

OECD approaches adult education as a field of study as follows: Adult education involves any learning activity or program that is specifically designed by any educational body to satisfy any educational need or educational interest that might be fulfilled or developed by any adult at any given time in their lives and whose main activity is not educational. This specifically designed learning activity covers non-professional, professional, general, basic and specific studies as well as any educational activity that has a collective social purpose (OECD, 1977). Moreover, continuing education and training comprises a branch of adult education and involves any type of education (general, specialized, basic). It also comprises education or skills training after basic education has been completed or one has enter a profession aiming at the improvement or development of knowledge and continuation of personal and professional growth (CEDEFOP, 2011). Especially with education professionals, continuing education as an aspect of their professional development leads to a shift in their professional attitude and behavior due to the fact that they further their knowledge and introduce innovative teaching methods which include elements of reflection into their teaching style. Continuing education, the way it is portrayed both in Greek and international literature, is not only about renewal and development of knowledge but also about bridging educational gaps that any education professional might have so as to be able to meet the demands of our times. At the same time, it is necessary to mention that placement of student teachers as well as the first years of being a teacher are crucial. (Karalis, Sotiropoulos, & Kampeza, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research aims to examine and compare the opinions of teachers as well as student teachers on lifelong learning and continuing education. It was conducted over the course of one academic year (2013-2014) and 19 people participated, 10 of whom were teachers and 9 were student teachers. More specifically, student teachers were in their fourth year of studies at the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education. 9 of the student teachers were 21 years of age and 1 was 22. As for the teachers, 9 of them are pre-school teachers in public nursery schools and were
aged between 31 and 50 years old. 6 out of 9 nursery school teachers hold a university degree and 3 of them hold a Master’s or a PhD degree.

The research follows qualitative data collection with semi-structured open-ended questions. The data collected by the student teachers was compared to the data collected by the nursery schools teachers.

Research questions were the following:

1. What are the opinions of teachers and student teachers as regards the meaning of the term lifelong learning and continuing education?
2. Are there any similarities or differences between the opinions of the teachers and student teachers as regards the meaning of the term lifelong learning and continuing education?

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS - DISCUSSION

There is both a convergence as well as divergence in the opinions of the participants as regards lifelong learning and how it is supposed to be treated. The majority of the participants, both the nursery teachers as well as the student teachers supported that lifelong learning is teaching that lasts throughout one’s life and includes educational activities such as seminars and-has to do with one’s professional development according to the opinions of the kindergarten teachers and with personal development according to the student teachers. However, the student teachers think that there will be a need for educational seminars and further training for the rest of their teaching careers. Therefore, it was concluded that the student teachers approach lifelong learning as an opportunity to develop all possible aspects, both professionally and personally, whereas the kindergarten teachers approached it as an opportunity to develop professionally. Moreover, kindergarten teachers attach to the term lifelong learning a univocal aspect, organizational and of professional nature, using quite often the term education to refer to it. On the other hand, the student teachers see it a bit further and talk about a more informal aspect of lifelong learning that extends beyond the scope of organization and profession.

Regarding the reasons why lifelong learning has become more known nowadays, they came to the conclusion that both sides think this happens because of the multiple rapid transitions that change their everyday lives. To be more specific, by examining the answers of the participants, the influence of financial as well as technological changes on forming their opinions that lifelong learning is rather important is apparent, as it constitutes the only way to advance and survive in our modern and quite demanding times. For example, one’s professional knowledge and expertise is fast becoming obsolete unless the meet the requirements of their continuously evolving profession.

We also have to mention that there is a convergence of opinions as far as the responsibility of the State is concerned as well as the responsibility of the individual that participates in continuing education programs. However, the student teachers place more emphasis on individual responsibility whereas the kindergarten teachers place more emphasis on the responsibility of the State. We notice that both the student teachers and the kindergarten teachers think that it is both the State’s as well as the individual’s responsibility to increase learning opportunities for teachers. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the answers the student teachers gave expressed some political and ideological beliefs that support neoliberal approaches to education, according to which the role of the State is not as important (public expenses and funding) and is limited to the coordination of some educational activities and to motivating the participation of citizens (certification and chances of professional advancement).

There is also convergence of opinions as to whether or not there are opportunities for continuing education. Both kindergarten teachers (9/9) and students teachers (10/10) support the existence of opportunities. The kindergarten teachers point out that they as individuals have to seize the opportunity and they support that there are not many. The student teachers agree and support that the individual is responsible for continuing his/her education and training. It is also worth mentioning that despite the opportunities, participation is not characterized by equality. Despite the fact that the neoliberal approach supports that there is a plethora of opportunity we have to point out that not everybody can exploit it. The kindergarten teachers were far more reserved as regards the opportunities available in comparison with the student teachers. This is because the kindergarten teachers are more experienced and have been involved in training programs whereas the student teachers can only imagine what the reality might be.

Moreover, another interesting fact that came up was that both the kindergarten teachers and the student teachers were very actively involved. The participants consider continuing education and skills training as a valuable aid to improving the existing educational system. This also seems to be the case throughout Europe since we can observe that there is an emphasis on the training of educationalists. It is also reported that there is a connection between the capacity of the educationalist and their students’ educational level. A teacher’s influence on the students is far greater than the organizational and administrative influence of a school and its financial status, which is rather comforting if we take into consideration the financial crisis the whole of Europe is going through.

Regarding the awareness of teachers and educationalists on programs of continuing education and training there is a great difference in the answers of the participants. The majority of the kindergarten teachers (7/9) consider themselves rather aware and informed about the training programs on continuing education in contrast to the majority of the student teachers (7/10) who don’t think that they are very well informed on such training programs. This polarization is justified because the kindergarten schools teachers are informed through their school, the counselor and the local authorities of Education. The student teachers in general do not have access to this kind of information. The student teachers hold the State responsible because it does not keep them informed and they also report that their priority is to graduate and then get informed about any kind of training program on continuing education.
Another issue that came up during the research was that of self-learning. Self-learning, as an aspect of lifelong learning is about the processes for which the learner is responsible for choosing not only the educational procedures but also for the choice of the training procedures on how to approach new learning resources such as internet-based learning and distance learning (Karalis & Koutsonikos, 2003). Both the kindergarten teachers and the student teachers reported that they use the same resources to educate themselves but evaluate them differently. The kindergarten teachers use books and journals whereas the student teachers choose training seminars and programs. The kindergarten teachers said that the second most used resource is the internet whereas for the students second comes the study of books and journals. The third most used resource for kindergarten teachers was discussion with colleagues while for the student teachers was the use of the internet. Both groups consider the role of the educationalist as twofold. They see him as a teachers as well as a facilitator and that is because of his responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

In this research we investigated two research questions concerning lifelong learning and continuing education. The first question is about the opinions of the teachers and student teachers for the content of terms lifelong learning and continuing education while the second question investigates the similarities and differences in the opinions of these two groups (teachers and student teachers).

All teachers and student teachers supported that lifelong learning is determined as the education that lasts throughout one’s life and includes educational activities (e.g. training seminars) mainly around one’s professional development according to the kindergarten teachers and mainly around personal development according to student teachers. The kindergarten school teachers attach to the term lifelong learning a univocal aspect, mainly of organizational and of professional nature, using quite often the term education to refer to it. On the other hand, the student teachers talk about a more informal aspect of lifelong learning that extends beyond the scope of organization and profession.

As regards the connection between lifelong learning and continuing education there is a convergence of opinions since both groups supported that they are intertwined with continuing education being considered as a subcategory of lifelong learning. Both sides think that this happens because of the multiple rapid changes that askew their everyday lives.

The student teachers that participated in the research see personal responsibility as more important while the kindergarten teachers hold the State more responsible. As to the opportunities provided by the State we concluded that there is also a convergence of opinions as both sides support that there are opportunities for further training. The kindergarten teachers were quite reserved as far as training opportunities are concerned whereas the student teachers seemed more optimistic. As for the issue of whether educationalists are informed and aware of such training opportunities there was a substantial difference of opinions. The majority of the kindergarten teachers consider themselves informed at a satisfactory level whereas the student teachers seemed more concerned whereas the student teachers think that they could be more informed of such opportunities. Both groups consider both the educationalist’s and the learner’s role as being twofold. Therefore, we came to the conclusion that there is not much of divergence of opinions between the two groups regarding the opinions they have formed around lifelong learning and continuing education. Specifically, both groups think of lifelong learning as the medium that will bring personal and professional improvement and treat continuing education as a subcategory of lifelong learning that has to do exclusively with professional training activities. Finally, we can see that both groups have a positive attitude towards continuing training with a view to advance both personally and professionally.

REFERENCES


