School-Based Counselling Work With Teachers: An Integrative Model

Elias Kourkoutas[a], Theodoros Giovazolias*[b]

[a] Department of Primary Education, University of Crete, Crete, Greece. [b] Department of Psychology, University of Crete, Crete, Greece.

Abstract

Teachers increasingly face many challenges in a wide range of areas, mainly in those related to their students' behavioural problems and psychological well-being. Evidence shows that teachers can effectively assist students at risk or with difficulties, when they are adequately guided and supported by well-trained school counsellors. Hence, the need for more holistic and systemic school-based interventions for children at risk and their families, as well as specialized assistance for teachers is advocated by many authors. Focusing on the role of teachers in promoting the social-emotional health of pupils at risk, the authors present the key components of an innovative counselling intervention within school context that focuses on enabling teachers being more resilient and more confident in order to better deal with cases of "difficult" students. The model integrates elements of systemic, psychodynamic and resilience based thinking with a strong emphasis on "inclusive education" issues. The authors describe the key theoretical background and the various aspects of this model, discussing the challenges of its implementation. They finally propose that in order to be effective, such models should emphasize the collaborative, dialectical, and systemic aspects of the counselling process with teachers. The final conclusion is that school counsellors have a critical role to play in supporting teachers helping their "difficult" pupils avoid school exclusion and develop further mental health problems.

Keywords: school-based teacher counselling, difficult pupils, integrative approach

Introduction

School Mental Health Issues and Teacher Stress

Counselling practices that are child- and family-centered and that take also into consideration the needs of the educational staff for emotional support and professional guidance seem to be the most effective in responding to children's problems (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Kourkoutas, 2012; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010). Disruptive or challenging behaviours, developmental disorders, learning difficulties, bullying and school violence are among the wide range of students' problems and challenges teachers are dealing within the contemporary educational context. The percentage of children requiring counselling support and intervention within schools varies (from 3 to 25%) depending on the severity and persistence of the difficulty or the challenging behaviour (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Simpson & Mundschenk, 2012).

Many studies and clinical reports have shown that students' developmental disorders and externalizing problems increase teachers' stress and "confusion", reducing their professional competence and jeopardizing the teacher-child relationship which is a critical factor in children's at risk psychosocial development (Fleming, Mackrain, & LeBuffe, 2013).

Extremely challenging behaviours which teachers are not able to manage usually result in conflicting situations and inappropriate practice, trapping them in a vicious cycle of negative and ineffective reactions with the "problem" students (Kourkoutas, 2012). Such unresolved conflicting situations undermine the students' psychosocial and academic development and the teachers' sense of professional identity or self-competence and emotional well-being (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004). In fact, students might miss out on critical opportunities to build and apply new skills when they are trapped in conflicting relationships with their teachers (Fleming et al., 2013).

A high percentage of students in difficulty, even in countries such as the US, where many mental health programs operate within schools, remain unsupported and without specialized assistance by competent professionals or teachers (Adelman & Taylor, 2010). Children from difficult or dysfunctional family backgrounds who are struggling with intense emotional or behavioural difficulties are likely to enact such "problematic" and "traumatic" conditions in various ways within school context.

In addition, during critical economic periods the families' coping mechanisms and emotional dynamics change dramatically and their dysfunctions are amplified with obviously detrimental effects on children's social, emotional and school pathway (Anagnostopoulos & Soumaki, 2012). Teachers are, therefore, forced to cope with an increasing number of demanding or unsupportive parents who often lack the adequate skills to support their child.

Teachers definitely require specialized support as they strongly emphasize the rising complexity of pupils' social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and the higher demands placed upon them in terms of effective dealing with a wide range of issues (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Kotroni, 2009; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; MacBeath et al., 2006). In fact, a positive relationship with a supportive teacher, in combination with early specialist intervention reduces the risk of a student entering an endless cycle of mutual rejection with his peers and teachers, academic and social failure, or drop out (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Kourkoutas, 2012; Levine, 2007; Simpson & Mund-schenk, 2012).

Overall, these and other emerging issues strongly suggest that there is an urgent need for school-based counsellors to increase their efforts in order to ensure appropriate specialised counselling assistance to teachers who need it (Christner et al., 2009; Erchul & Sheridan, 2008; MacBeath, Galton, Steward, MacBeath, & Page, 2006). Studies have shown that the implementation of flexible in-school psychosocial and counselling programs, together with the stable involvement of parents and teachers, that target the most vulnerable and at-risk students can be very effective and less costly than more complex mental health services within or outside school (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007). Teacher involvement and contribution in practices that aim at helping children at risk is an important element of innovative partnership models of care within school context (Levine, 2007). On the whole, school is considered the ideal site to implement counselling programs that target an increasing number of children and families who are struggling with mild or more serious problems. An important component of such programs is the counselling support of and partnership work with teachers. As suggested by the National Association of School Psychologists, school counsellors should be able to work collaboratively with the teaching personnel to create and maintain a continuum of services to support all students' attainment of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral goals (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010).

The Role of Teachers in Promoting the Social and Emotional Health of Vulnerable and At-Risk Students

An increasingly large number of theorists and specialists acknowledge the *therapeutic* role of the educator in dealing with children with serious problems or difficulties (Elliott & Place, 2012; Kourkoutas, 2012).

In fact, Reddy and colleagues have found that changes in perceptions of teachers' support reliably predicted changes in self-esteem and depression in both boys and girls (Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003). Other research has shown that a positive relationship with teachers may significantly reduce children's behavioural and psychosocial difficulties and promote school adjustment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Rohner, 2010; Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter, & Morgan, 2008).

Richardson and Shupe (2003) have found, that increased self-awareness among teachers resulted in a more accurate understanding of how students affect teachers' own emotional processes and behaviours and how these, in turn, affect students. However, while it is clear that teachers' emotional competence plays a significant role in effective teaching (i.e. preventing burnout and contributing to students' learning and performance), there is no clear method to enhance these competencies (Hen & Sharabi-Nov, 2014). Gibbs (2003) claimed that teachers need to develop the capacity to exercise control over their internal world (emotions, thoughts and beliefs) in order to improve their teaching abilities. Shapiro (2010) believes that through the expression of emotional identity, teachers can develop greater reflexivity, stronger solidarity and heightened sensitivity toward their colleagues and students (see Hen & Sharabi-Nov, 2014). In a similar vein, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) proposed teachers' promotion of social and emotional competencies through stress reduction and mindfulness programs.

Research demonstrates the relationship between social-emotional factors and academic achievement in students (Elias & Haynes, 2008). At risk students who can benefit from supportive and non-conflicting or rejecting relationships with teachers seem to better recover academically and reengage with peers and learning processes than those without these positive relationships (Rohner, 2010).

Overall, it seems that these students highly benefit from social-emotional programs and interventions in which their teachers are involved, both at academic and interpersonal level.

Teachers undoubtedly play a substantial role in taking action to prevent students from developing further psychological problems. Of course teachers are not trained to be experts in psychological difficulties and interventions; however they are often involved in intense (personal and professional) interaction with their students; as they spend a substantial amount of time with them, teachers can provide vital information regarding their behaviour and functioning and help professionals designing appropriate interventions (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013).

However, there is evidence that few general education classroom teachers are adequately assisted in helping and "including" students with social, emotional disorders or behavioural problems, or are trained in effective methods and strategies for engaging with these students in an efficient way (Simpson & Mundschenk, 2012). In many UK schools, good intentions, combined with inadequate staff training has proven to be a recipe for failure, often contributing to a rising tide of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties which, in turn, result in the educational staff becoming emotionally exhausted and feeling they have reached a professional impasse (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011).

In addition, the high rates of teachers' professional burn-out in UK and US confirm the urgent need for specialised assistance at emotional and professional level. The need of teachers to be supported by counsellors who are trained in education issues and have experience of collaborative partnership with education staff is also highlighted by the relevant research (Fleming et al., 2013; Kourkoutas & Georgiadi, 2011).

The Role of School Counsellors in Promoting Emotional and Professional Resilience and Support to Teachers

There is evidence that students with psychosocial difficulties are better served by school-based counsellors than by professionals in traditional psychiatric settings, especially when counsellors integrate scientific knowledge and expertise with inclusive goals and school-family-professionals partnership (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; McNab, 2009; Simpson & Mundschenk, 2012; Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling, & Carson, 2000). Services in a traditional mental health setting are usually limited to individual treatment rather than involving a partnership with teachers and schools and, thus, missing to ensure a more holistic and systemic approach which seems to be the most appropriate for this age (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Harwood & Allan, 2014; Weare, 2005). Psychiatric settings do not provide any kind of professional support for teachers and school staff, thus reducing the likelihood that intervention will be comprehensive and holistic. Although many outside school psychiatric services can be useful for a troubled child, there is evidence that for school-age children individual treatment based on the medical approach has limited success (Harwood & Allan, 2014; Ogden & Hagen, 2008; Schmidt, 2010; Simpson & Mundschenk, 2012; Wyn et al., 2000). While further research is needed, there is evidence that, multilevel and multisystemic programs that integrate child-centred, teacher-centred, and family-centred counselling interventions are the most effective to help "difficult" students (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Kourkoutas, 2012; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010).

Evidence supports a model in which school-based counsellors and educational psychologists work beyond their traditional assessment role and support teachers and school principals at an emotional and psycho-educational level so that they become more effective in dealing with 'difficult' students (Adelman & Taylor, 2010). To achieve this goal, it seems necessary for school counsellors to assume a systemic, resilient (strength-based) and psychodynamic orientation in their work with teachers in order to provide them with a useful insight into the personal and family dynamics or emotional and developmental challenges of children at risk (Fleming et al., 2013; Galassi & Akos, 2007; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010; Schmidt, 2010). In fact, it has been argued that often the 'manualised' practices and advice that school counsellors usually provide the school staff, have a weak effect on the work of teachers (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Levine, 2007; Urquhart, 2009). Available data and clinical findings show that school counsellors who base their work on resilient, holistic-systemic and psychodynamic principles without neglecting innovative (positive) behavioural techniques can promote teachers' capacity for reflection and action in ways that can be very effective for the promotion of the academic and social resilience of vulnerable or difficult students (Cohen, 2013; Doll, 2013; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Tol et al., 2011; Urquhart, 2009).

Therefore, counselling teams should be flexible and integrative in their theoretical thinking and counselling practice in order to better respond to the complex school dynamics and to the heterogeneity of problems and needs of the vulnerable or challenging students and their families, as well as to empower the educational staff in their role (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Murphy & Gilbert, 2000). Many school counsellors and psychologists remain entrapped in a conventional clinical position, essentially focusing on assessment reports and 'distant' coaching without being involved in collaborative work with school staff, in order to avoid teachers' demands for immediate action and specific solutions (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Kourkoutas, 2012; Levine, 2007; Schmidt, 2010; Weist, 2003). Teachers need to be valued in their work with difficult students and employ techniques and strategies that are meaningful for them and are appropriate for the specific educational context they operate (Fleming et al., 2013; Kourkoutas, Hart, & Langher, 2011; Urquhart, 2009).

Furthermore, it has been stressed that counselors should focus their efforts on enabling teachers to develop their own skills for intervention and build on their gained knowledge and experience in order to adequately respond to their students' needs (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2005).

Traditional Mental Health Programs and New Conceptions in Childhood Disorder: A Paradigm Shift in School-Based Counselling Work

On the basis of previous considerations, many authors have argued in favour of a paradigm shift in school coun-selling and educational psychology area, especially in working with mainstream and Special Education Needs teachers (Farrell & Venables, 2009; Harris, 2007; Kourkoutas & Xavier, 2010; McNab, 2009; Weist, 2003). These authors emphasise the collaborative, dialectical and systemic aspects of a counselling process involving and "targeting" teachers, which should be preferred to medicalised approaches of "experts". Traditional expert- and deficit-oriented models do not usually take into consideration teachers' knowledge and contribution to helping vulnerable, at-risk and difficult students and do not really focus on helping teachers deal at emotional and practical level with the challenges of supporting and including "difficult" or "problematic" students. Expert- and deficit-oriented models are likely to result in the use of pre-determined interventions and ignore the dynamics of the specific school context, unavoidably neglecting the school personnel's needs for guidance, support and supervision (Galassi & Akos, 2007; Levine, 2007). Many expert-oriented interventions prioritise one-to-one work with the child, undervaluing the systemic components and the complexities of the school environment. Although such interventions are based on sound psychological theory, they often fail to consider the complexities of the school context and provide teachers with meaningful for them guidance which would highly contribute to their professional development, as well (see also Harwood & Allan, 2014; Schmidt, 2010; Weare, 2005).

The introduction of new conceptions of childhood difficulties/disabilities and a new holistic counselling framework that promotes an integrative model integrating elements from various approaches constitutes one of the most challenging issues for theorists and professionals in the area of school–educational psychology and counselling (Blocher, 2000; Christner et al., 2009; Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 2006; Kourkoutas & Xavier, 2010; McNab, 2009; Murphy & Gilbert, 2000; Paternite, 2005; Schmidt, 2010; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007).

Individual clinical work with children and families can be appropriate and very helpful at times, but there is much evidence indicating that the effectiveness of such programs depends on the flexibility, the innovative methods and strategies, and the type of practice professionals provide in order to gain a comprehensive insight into the child's, family's, and school's problems (Carr, 2009; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Schmidt, 2010). More specifically, traditional clinical individual-centered treatment has been criticized as operating in a strongly medicalising approach, mainly drawing on a categorical 'deficit-centered' conceptualization of child difficulties while failing to explore and promote individual competence (e.g. social, emotional skill development) and contextual (family or teacher) resi-lience (Aumann & Hart, 2009; Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Harwood & Allan, 2014). Such approaches often fail to adopt a systemic perspective beyond the individual symptoms and ensure child-, family-, and teacher-centered work which seems to be very effective in helping families and teachers deal with students' problems (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Rendall & Stuart, 2005).

In contrast, an *inclusive partnership* counselling model places particular emphasis on working cooperatively with families and teachers of at risk students to enhance and reinforce parenting and pedagogical skills. By guiding and supporting parents and teachers, this model places, at the heart of the intervention goal, the improvement of their practices and attitudes towards the "difficult", "problematic, or vulnerable child and the enhancement of their

relational skills (Paternite, 2005; Schmidt, 2010; Urquhart, 2009). Therefore, one of the main objectives of the school or educational psychologist is to focus on resolving conflicting or hostile relationships between teacher and students. It is, in fact, crucial for professionals who work in an inclusive perspective to help teachers overcome their hostile or ambivalent feelings and prejudices towards "difficult students" and engage with those students in more meaningful and creative teaching methods. As there is a growing questioning, in counseling psychology area, of the "medical model" of professional-client relationship and a move towards a more humanistic base value (Strawbridge & Wolfe, 2010, p. 4). The counselor's role is therefore pivotal in helping teachers ensure a "holding" and supportive educational and relational environment for students with difficulties; an educational relational setting that compensates for family or poor school adjustment problems allowing, in this way, vulnerable or "problematic" students to maximize their learning and social-skills potential and achieve satisfactory academic adjustment (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010).

However, recent studies in the UK have highlighted the fact that educational psychologists still spend the bulk of their time undertaking formal special education evaluations using IQ tests or traditional psychometric scales (see Farrell & Venables, 2009). Hence, professional interests and a fear of future employment possibilities for educational psychologists who break away from traditional roles seems to represent a major barrier towards a shift from using traditional methods towards more inclusive-oriented and more integrated models of counselling in schools (Kourkoutas & Xavier, 2010). Farrell and Venables (2009) criticize the fact that educational and school psychologists would very often continue to work as they do to maintain their own professional stability, perhaps at the expense of the children and families they are supposed to help. These authors believe that the role of educational psychologists as promoters of inclusion for "vulnerable" children should be reinforced and broadened.

Sapountzis (2012) draws attention to the fact that school counsellors, as they work, often do not have the opportunity to listen to and understand the "language" of the student's symptoms and what their actions create for them and generate in others. In fact, school psychologists may inadvertently contribute to interventions "*that fail to reach the student and bridge the gap between his acts and his capacity to reflect on his experiences*" (p. 181).

The same applies to teachers: many teachers are not aware of the effect the child's behaviour has upon them. Such observations are very common during the focus groups workshops, we are often implemented within Greek schools. However, if well supported, teachers can have access to the "hidden voices" of children, the (distorted) "narratives" children bring to school, masked and disguised under their symptomatic reactions and problematic behaviours which are usually due to the incapacity of the child to process and verbalize the traumatic or disturbing and often alienating experiences in their family and school life. Acting out the problematic experience and the emotional burden associated with it, is a common way for these children to function and survive. In fact, difficult or vulnerable children are less skilful and competent in "working" such feelings through acceptable or prosocial ways. Teachers may also be short-circuited by the intensity of some children's or their parents' indirect and implicit pressures, placing teachers in a position of extreme stress.

Overall, traditional counselling theories have underestimated the importance of developing and evaluating practices that help teachers to include students with social, emotional, behavioural, or academic problems. It is not coincidental that in the last edition of the *Handbook of School Counselling*, only a brief chapter was devoted to work with teachers without however mentioning specific guidelines or discussing in deep the issues and challenges of such a work (Clemente, 2011). In addition, school counsellors who maintain a traditional role fail to successfully help

teachers get a thorough insight into their "difficult" or "problematic" students' internal dynamics or underlying factors that jeopardize their psychosocial development (Hanko, 2002; Kourkoutas, 2012).

It is worth noticing that many school counsellors who work in exclusively expert-based approaches may face problems in their working relationship with teachers, especially in schools where the educational staff are committed to inclusive education values. A recent study aimed at exploring the difficulties in the Greek educational system showed that school psychologists may feel (a) exposed to unjustified comments, or criticism, or not be recognized as scientists who can bring changes to the teacher's work (because teachers suggest they are not really helped in meaningful ways and theory is different than practice) ; (b) feel frustrated by the lack of attention and recognition paid to their work; (c) face extreme resistance when trying to implement or suggest their perspective in "problem-atic" children's work (Kourkoutas, 2012; Kourkoutas & Georgiadi, 2011).

In addition, many other studies have highlighted the frustration and unmet needs of teachers working with "difficult" students, when they report their experience in collaborating with counsellors. Indeed, many of them report being inadequately supported and guided by the school counsellors, when they face very challenging cases of children asserting that counsellors work in a very theoretical direction (Fleming et al., 2013; Hanko, 2001; Kourkoutas, 2012). In a recent study in Greece, despite the fact that many teachers find very useful the work with counsellors, they report high levels of frustration as (a) they are not well informed by the counsellors in details on the child's situation, progress, and type of problems he/she is experiencing, or specific methods to deal with, (b) they usually get diagnosis that is meaningless or very vague, or already known, (c) they get very vague instructions to work in the classroom and school life with problematic children, (d) they feel only partially supported at emotional level, as they feel counsellors are working in a certain distance from them. Taken as a whole, the available research emphasizes the importance of developing school-based psychosocial programmes focusing on educational staff counselling support in order for teachers to increase and improve their own emotional and educational skills and respond in meaningful and positive ways (involving firm attitudes not influenced by negative emotional reactions) to children's problems (Billington, 2006; Fell, 2002; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schmidt, 2010; Weare, 2005).

In summary, school counsellors should be able to develop new skills and change their practice by focusing on issues related to teacher and school needs; they are well placed to support, guide and supervise the teacher work in ways that differ from the traditional medical practice and thus reinforce students' at risk social and school inclusion which seems to be one of the most critical protective factor for these students (Doll, 2013; Espelage & Poteat, 2012a; Farrell & Venables, 2009; Fleming et al., 2013; Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Schmidt, 2010).

An Integrative Counselling Model Within Greek School Contexts: Theoretical Foundations, Key Principles and Components

Foundations of an Integrative Counselling Model With Teachers

During recent years, a specific 'integrative whole-school' counselling model drawing on various theoretical foundations has been implemented within the school context in order to respond to many challenges of the Greek educational system and the social-economic crisis. In fact, the effects of the current economic situation on families and children appear to be severe and in many cases dramatic. The families' and school's problems and dysfunctions have increased and amplified. Educational staff, mostly in Greece but also in other educational systems (UK, USA), urgently requires immediate or permanent support and precise solutions so as to respond to the accumulated

challenges and ensure a more safe and stable educational environment, as many teachers feel frustrated and partially supported by traditional school based Mental Health Services (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013).

Many of them have declared being in a total confusion because of their incapacity to understand how challenging children feel and think or why some of their challenging students act the way they are or resist to positive efforts on the part of the educational staff. Many teachers report being in a total emotional "confusion", often feeling overwhelmed by stress and very disoriented, especially when they have to deal with problematic behaviours or children that are coming from very dysfunctional family backgrounds (Giovazolias, Kourkoutas, Mitsopoulou, & Georgiadi, 2010; Kourkoutas & Georgiadi, 2011; Kourkoutas, Georgiadi, & Hadjaki, 2011) (see also Fleming et al., 2013).

In terms of counselling framework and related techniques, this model encompasses a broader integrative and eclectic approach (Blocher, 2000; Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Danchev, 2010; Holm-Hadulla, Hofmann, & Sperth, 2011; Murphy & Gilbert, 2000; Schmidt, 2010; Strawbridge & Wolfe, 2010). In fact this model, integrates elements of psychodynamic, systemic, and problem-focused or resilience based techniques, mainly, used in the direct work with children (Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Holm-Hadulla et al., 2011; Murphy & Gilbert, 2000). In addition, the focus on a relationship model is crucial, as there is an increasing awareness among many practitioners in counselling psychology area of the significance of the helping relationship and a developing interest in facilitating well-being as opposed to responding to sickness and pathology (Strawbridge & Wolfe, 2010, p. 4).

Key Principles and Components of an Integrative Counselling Model With Teachers

The proposed model of integrative counselling is based on modern psychotherapy and counselling psychology research (Blocher, 2000; Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Danchev, 2010; Espelage & Poteat, 2012a), as well as the hermeneutics of dynamic communication and interaction within school contexts. It corresponds to a phenomenological reality, and is in itself coherent and of practical value to counsellors (Holm-Hadulla et al., 2011). Some of the aspects included in the model are open to empirical investigation, such as the outcome of counselling or the presence of the single components during the counselling process. This model is in accordance with Cooper and McLeod's work, who claim that a pluralistic approach can help the counselling and psychotherapy field move towards a greater appreciation of all potentials, such as the community or school contexts. The therapeutic interventions provided within these contexts could be more closely tailored to the specific needs and expectations of the clients that counsellors work with (Cooper & McLeod, 2011).

More specifically, the model draws on a series of theoretical and research-based frameworks such as, for example, the systemic and contemporary psychodynamic thinking (Smith, 2012), the resilient theory and relevant strength-based practice in schools[i] (Espelage & Poteat, 2012a; Espelage & Poteat, 2012b; Galassi & Akos, 2007; Goldstein & Brooks, 2007), the inclusive education model (which emphasizes the social relationships and academic development, which are essential parts of each student's identity), and the school-based counselling-psychotherapeutic theory and research (Espelage & Poteat, 2012a; Farrell & Venables, 2009; Kourkoutas, 2012; Pattison, 2005, 2006; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007; Urquhart, 2009). The systemic thinking (Rendall & Stuart, 2005) provides a holistic framework for identifying the many factors influencing the development of emotional, behavioural and school adjustment problems of children at risk and the barriers for improvement encountered within school contexts, as well as the strengths, potential, needs and weaknesses of the staff working with these students. The systemic model emphasises the transactional processes implicated in the child's difficulties and the need for multi-faceted,

multi-level counselling interventions, as well as the importance of gaining a meaningful insight into the various internal and contextual dynamics that shape the complex interactions between educational staff, the social classroom environment and the students with difficulties. A psychodynamic strength-based approach to counselling emphasizes the development of personal potential by dynamically exploring and strengthening the subjective experience and any underlying potential which has usually been impeded, both in the case of the difficult child and the educational staff.

Experiences With the Model

In the counselling work with teachers, the central idea which has been proved to be quite effective is that by promoting insight into emotional and family-social, or interpersonal factors of children's problematic functioning, we enhance teachers' overall knowledge and competence to support their students' at risk social and school inclusion and avoid further mental health problems. By ensuring with specific guidelines and instructions in many cases of difficult or at risk students and by supervising their application, teachers feel more confident and are encouraged to discuss, evaluate, reflect on and modify or readjust the teacher practice and attitude towards the "problem" child. Supervision and guidance is seen as a dynamic and long term process and both individual and group sessions (each one has its positive and weak aspects) are ensured in order to achieve better outcomes. As teachers experience high rates of stress and other negative emotional reactions, such as anger, rage, disappointment, sadness, or frustration, and even depressive feelings, when they are dealing with difficult or challenging children, the working alliance and the relationship with the teacher is at the centre of this approach.

In fact, our findings show that if helped to understand the complex emotional dynamics that are triggered in their relationships with the "challenging" students and mainly with their parents, teachers feel lees threatened and more confident in their competences. They even feel relieved when their (often) extreme negative feelings towards these children are acknowledged, respected, and rationally explained (interpreted) within the context of the child- or family-teacher interaction. When teachers become more aware of the causes and sources of these negative emotional interactions, they become more able to emotionally step back, and therefore develop more positive involvement with the child. In addition, teachers' knowledge of adverse and stressful family circumstances usually increase their empathy and understanding of the child's academic failures and problematic behaviour (Espelage & Poteat, 2012a; Rendall & Stuart, 2005; Schmidt, 2010). Children who have experienced lack of boundaries and negative behavioural role-modelling, or problematic and even traumatic relationships in their family environment tend to reproduce these patterns or emotional experiences in their relationships with the other children or their teachers.

Knowledge and understanding of sources of stress on the part of teachers and appropriate guidance can help them modify their classroom attitudes and strategies and therefore become able to prevent the unintentional reproduction of family traumatic and problematic relationships in the school setting, by the rejection of these children or by the use of inappropriate practice (Hanko, 2001; Kourkoutas, 2012).

Overall, a systemic psychodynamic thinking or supervision can enable teachers to refine their observation, mediation and mentalisation skills and gain a deeper awareness of such complex interactions which might often have a "*counter-transferential" character* (e.g. when a teacher who is in a permanent confrontation with a "problem" child admits that he/she is also as "egotistic" and competitive as the child, or when teachers realize during the workshop group that they are "essentially very angry" because of the parental behaviour or attitude). Although the main goal

of the group meeting is not to provide *therapy* to teachers but to make them more open to new ideas, self-reflective and critical towards traditional or ineffective practices, such a group can have a very positive *therapeutic* effect on the way teachers function, especially when they are overwhelmed by intense negative emotions. In fact, difficult children are likely to trigger and *transmit* to very receptive or sensible teachers the same negative emotional burden they carry, through non-verbal processes.

Overall, counsellors working in this direction can provide teachers with meaningful explanation in order to help them regain control and awareness of the complex processes activated when dealing with difficult students and their parents (Munich, 2006). Free of often "toxic" and "destructive" or even depressive feelings and trends, teachers are more likely to find out practical ways to respond to such challenges.

In fact, "supportive supervision" is a term, introduced to describe the process, in the context of school counselling, of providing a safe and *intermediary* space to teachers in combination with the necessary professional guidance, in order to help them find meaningful ways to respond to challenging students (Kourkoutas, 2012; Kourkoutas & Xavier, 2010). The particular character of this intervention process allows teachers to create their own *narratives* about children's lives and themselves as well. Under the impact of counsellor or group work, these narratives will be reformulated and will create new systems of meaning (see also Rendall & Stuart, 2005). Moreover, as Pines (2002) has stressed, teachers need to believe that the things they do are important and meaningful. This is, in fact, reflected in the shared consensus that the most important and significant role is to educate their students, inspire them to enjoy learning and to subsequently shape their personalities, as well as enhance the personal development of those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Pines, 2002).

In addition, psychodynamic thinking allows counsellors to go beyond the child's symptomatic reactions and see the *real child* and his/her family behind the problem behaviour (Rizq, 2010). In fact, teachers are encouraged and helped to gain insight or distinguish the complex emotional needs and problematic family processes (conflicting-ambivalent or destructive feelings, such as anger, or feeling lost, confused or depressive, a lack of boundaries within the family, etc.) that might lie behind or generate disruptive behaviour. Despite the fact that many teachers tend to easily identify a specific behaviour as pathological, many others tend to "suffer" from what Elliott and Place have termed "selective myopia"; namely the teacher inability to appropriately estimate the severity of less disruptive cases of children or understand the internal conflicts or struggle with depressive tendencies that some children are experiencing (Elliott & Place, 2012).

Likewise, this perspective can be very useful in the counselling work with teachers as it focuses on the emotional aspects of the teachers' functioning, their internal confusion or stress, their struggle to identify the meaning of the child's situation, their own deception or guilt about not providing enough help to "difficult" children. Teachers also experience and feel frustrated or angry when they are unable to *contain* their students' disruptive feelings and reactions. The counselling process may provide this *real* and *metaphoric (psychic) space* to help teachers reinforce their self-awareness and self-confidence, explore the meaning of the problematic reaction, and, therefore, start to think and react in more "reasonable" ways. In fact, when teachers and counsellors work within a collaborative perspective, they participate in the establishment of a co-constructed *holding* space (a space of learning and professional development) and a dialogue that allows them to strengthen their critical thinking, as experience and knowledge are shared and discussed (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Rendall & Stuart, 2005; Schmidt, 2010).

The model has been implemented for more than 8 years now in Cretan schools involving a high number of school staff members. The model has been progressively transformed and adjusted to the specific cultural and crisis

context in order to improve its positive effect by drawing on findings gathered through continuous and various evaluation processes (Kourkoutas, 2008; Kourkoutas & Georgiadi, 2011; Kourkoutas, Georgiadi, & Hadjaki, 2011).

Discussion

As previously mentioned, teachers who work with difficult or challenging students are exposed to many stressful situations and emotional risks and are prone to developing inappropriate emotional and pedagogical reactions as a consequence (Hanko, 2001). For example, teachers may over-react to a situation or tend to attribute the problematic behaviour to a pathology *within* the child because they feel confused, powerless, unsupported or emotionally ambivalent when dealing with difficult students.

More specifically, it has been well documented that teachers often report feeling distressed, disappointed, offended, undervalued, disoriented, sad, depressed, or –most frequently - unsupported or ill-trained, when working with students with various difficulties, but especially students with challenging or disruptive behaviour (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; Kourkoutas, Hart, & Langher, 2011; Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Thanos, Kourkoutas, & Vitalaki, 2006). They may have several strategies, but still fail to modify the child's behaviour and become emotionally disappointed or distressed by the child's negative responses. Other teachers are not aware of the hostile emotions difficult children's behaviour evokes in them, which may make them easily upset or result in them becoming entrapped in coercive interactions. Feeling acute stress usually leads to an ineffective or hostile response to a situation. Psychologists and counsellors who opt for an integrative systemic perspective should help teachers to become aware of such feelings and their possible impact.

Likewise, the issues that repetitively came up in our focus group or individual sessions were related to similar topics, such as the lack of understanding and inability to properly distinguish (diagnosis or assessment issues) the causes or the meaning of the various forms of the children's emotional or development disorders; the way teachers feel (teacher stress and weaknesses), act or can effectively respond to problematic behaviours or vulnerable children's needs; their role as educators and the limits of their personal and professional responsibility; their emotional and professional needs and lack of adequate training and support; linking family problems with student behaviour; going beyond psychiatric categories, understanding and distinguishing the differences between the various forms of aggressive behaviour and the underlying emotional or family and developmental parameters and dynamics; understanding the implicit meaning of many of these behaviours and designing adequate responses (e.g. a child who permanently or intentionally defies teachers or a child who occasionally steals, etc.) beyond the formal or psychiatric labels; learning difficulties and how academic deficiencies might amplify emotional and behavioural problems; the complexity of risk and protective factors system and the possibilities of intervention beyond the traditional teaching role; the stress associated with relations with parents of problematic children; how to respond to emotional or physical abuse and maltreatment; how to deal with the intense negative emotions that usually go along with teachers' reactions towards parental problematic attitudes; evaluation of the implemented practices; "meta-thinking" on and evaluation of the project work; the use of these meetings as a therapeutic support, and so on.

To achieve a working partnership with educational staff, it is essential to make teachers feel part of the interdisciplinary team and give them responsibility. Sharing and communicating case studies and ideas or beliefs about how to work with specific students and their families in individual sessions is important. Many teachers feel puzzled and confused if they are not consulted and given access to clinical conclusions and evaluations but are simply

asked to follow specific guidelines or tips; in that sense, teachers should be made aware of the conclusion of any assessment and evaluation process relating to a child and his or her family. It is also necessary that the clinical and practical approach used by the educational psychologist should be clear and meaningful to the teacher. The rationale for every suggested strategy should be adequately communicated; decisions about interventions should take account the teacher's knowledge about the specific case. The school counsellor should base the case formulation on clinical and psychometric assessments of the child, as well as on his or her own sessions with the child and family. Clearly, teachers' conclusions and suggestions should be regarded as essential elements of a thorough, multisource evaluation of any child.

The teachers' difficulties in creating a productive partnership with the counsellors, which would enable them to effectively and appropriately respond to their "challenging students" have to do, among others, with the following: (a) overestimation of the learning process,; (b) overestimation of personal experience; (c) pride in one's own method or fears of being overexposed or criticized about one's teaching methods and tactics; (d) lack of previous positive professional experience with school psychologists; (e) strong resistance due to personal difficulties-problems; (f) strong conflicting relationships with the parents of the "problematic" child (Kourkoutas, 2008).

Overall, counsellors should recognise and respect the experience of teachers, and be aware of their own negative feelings and tendency to become competitive when interacting with educational staff. Conflicts usually emerge because teachers' experience is undervalued. Experts often opt for strategies which are theory-based but are not necessarily suited to the circumstances of a particular case. They may also fail to take into account the special dynamics of a school classroom, and the relationship between teachers and students with behavioural problems.

Findings From Previous Research Regarding Counselling Practice With Teachers

Drawing on previous research findings and on data gathered from the evaluation of intervention projects in Greek school contexts (Kourkoutas, 2008; Kourkoutas, 2012; Kourkoutas & Georgiadi, 2011; Kourkoutas et al., 2012), we think that the following should be taken into consideration for a teacher counselling program to be successful, (also taking into account possible cultural differences and the characteristics of each educational system): a) recognition of the important and equal role of the teacher in intervention projects regarding children with social, emotional, behavioural and academic problems, (b) recognition and respect for the negative emotions and difficulties teachers usually experience in relation to the "problem" child, (c) dealing with negative stereotypes, representations and teachers' feelings (anger, humiliation, injustice) in relation to the child, in a non-critical manner, (d) provide teachers with a concise theoretical framework relating to specific case formulation in order to help them gain insight into the emotional and family or contextual dynamics that underlie the problem behaviour (personal and contextual risk or burdening factors) or factors that might strengthen the inner potential of the child, (e) building on teachers' knowledge and intuition from their relational and interactional experience with the "problem" child; building on teachers' experience and educational knowledge to find specific solutions within the classroom and promote the social and academic inclusion of vulnerable or difficult students, (f) focusing on specific intervention techniques and attitudes to meet the child's needs and strengths; recognize the limits of the teacher's role in intervention projects (g) overcoming the resistance of teachers to using innovative practices or alternative approaches in dealing with the "problem" child by meticulously discussing their personal beliefs and ideas, as well as why some specific strategies have failed and others are likely to succeed, (h) involving teachers in the family intervention process, when possible; (i) helping teachers become aware of and recognize the complexity of family dynamics and how parental attitudes might impact the child's functioning (j) helping teachers become aware of how dysfunctional or problematic and coercive family patterns might be reproduced within school and in the child-teacher in-

teraction; stable and reliable collaboration with and supervision of teachers' work in order to help them effectively deal with new challenges or become aware of the child's efforts to progress and recognize the achieved improvement, developments or reactions of the child; (k) constant emotional support of the teacher; (l) deeper and better understanding of the internal dynamics and needs of 'problematic' children; (m) helping teachers identify and enhance individual skills or focus on exploring ignored strengths/talents of the difficult child (see also Brooks, Brooks, & Goldstein, 2012; Fell, 2002; Hanko, 2002; Monsen & Cameron, 2002; Monsen & Graham, 2002).

Findings from intervention programs focusing on enhancing teachers' emotional intelligence have showed an increase in self introspection, emotional awareness, emotional regulation and understanding others (Hen & Sharabi-Nov, 2014). The teacher's emotional intelligence and mindfull skills are considered essential components of good practice with "problem" students and pupils, who are difficult to teach, enhancing these students' academic and emotional resilience (Cohen, 2013; Doll, 2013).

Suggestions for a Successful Partnership Work With Teachers Within Schools

Many authors propose several points which underlie a partnership counselling model and which are essential to its success. One main point is that counselling should involve shared ownership, collaborative problem solving and co-construction of spaces of learning and emotional and professional experience exchange; this dynamic interaction would enable school counsellors and educational staff to foster teacher skills for introspection and mindful empathetic and dynamic responses to "challenging" students (Hanko, 2001).

Educational psychologists should take a positive, non-critical attitude to educational professionals' incompetence, mistakes and inappropriate choices when it comes to psychological strategies and interventions (Espelage & Poteat, 2012a). They should also avoid positioning themselves as the omnipotent specialist or developing an antagonistic relationship with educational staff, even in periods of high stress and pressure that characterise working with challenging students.

Taking the time to listen empathetically and understand teachers' problems, convictions, and perceptions – most importantly their feelings – is the first significant step in developing an open, collaborative relationship (Espelage & Poteat, 2012a; Fell, 2002; Hanko, 2002; Monsen & Graham, 2002). In addition, respecting the teacher's knowledge, weaknesses, feelings of confusion - even his or her irrational reactions and beliefs - and avoiding personal comments or becoming judgmental are essential to developing a truly co-operative relationship and successful working alliance. Many educational psychologists are not aware of their critical attitude towards teachers, their subconscious professional superiority, and implicitly underestimate teacher's experience. Negative attitudes are often rationalised and hidden behind clinical expertise that psychologists perceive they own, based on the 'objective' tests on which they base their case formulation. In many cases, the teacher's experience and knowledge of the student is consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, omitted from the psychologist's thinking and possible co-operative work with the teacher is thus undermined. Teachers work with the student every day in the classroom, playing a pivotal role in the student's school inclusion, which is an important factor in reducing aggressive behaviour. Many educational psychologists are unaware of research on the effectiveness of school inclusion and the systemic ecological approach to reducing children's behaviour problems and emotional disruptions (Weist, 2003). Educational psychologists usually rely on the expert model which prioritises individual work (the medical approach). Educational psychologists are not usually trained in systemic educational or psychodynamic techniques, and are likely to reject the inclusive educational and partnership model as 'non-clinical', losing sight of an essential and useful (internal or external) part of students' 'problematic' functioning (Farrell & Venables, 2009; Goldstein &

Brooks, 2007; Hanko, 2001; Levine, 2007; McNab, 2009; Urquhart, 2009). They tend to emphasise individual treatment, which increases the risk to be ineffective because it fails to take into account crucial parameters and information on the student's environment (Brooks et al., 2012; Hanko, 2002). It is thus essential that educational psychologists work in partnership with teachers in child-centred and school-inclusive projects (Dyson & Howes, 2009; Farrell & Venables, 2009; McNab, 2009).

The main goal in working with teachers is to help them gain an integrative insight into a case, and handle conscious or unconscious hostile feelings and negative attitudes towards a difficult student; this means that it is essential to ensure that the teacher has a positive attitude and avoids arguments, taking a constructive approach to finding and implementing the most effective solution (Fell, 2002). Counsellors and educational psychologists may have to work with teachers who reject challenging students and are very hostile towards them; when this is the case, counsellors should use their professional skills to gain the teachers' trust, collaborate constructively with them, and seek to influence the work of the educational staff so as to reduce risk. Novel strategies can be used in such cases, and counsellors should be encouraged to be creative in their approach.

Psychologists and other professionals who work in high stress situations with complex group dynamics should be supervised. This would enable them to recognise on a personal professional level the emotional tensions and the negative feelings generated by conflicts. Supervision can help professionals deal with the stress they feel when they are trying to find solutions in the face of children's, parents' and teachers' resistance.

For example, Hanko (2002) suggests that in-service teachers may better understand the psychodynamic base of a problem behaviour and counselling work if they come to understand that (a) children with problematic behaviour are experiencing feelings they find difficult to bear, but this behaviour is more easily managed when these feelings are understood by the people who are involved with them; (b) children's difficult behaviour (whether displayed overtly or masked by over-compliance or withdrawal) is probably a reaction to a situation they perceive as difficult to manage because it echoes similar past events, perhaps in damaging relationships; (c) what matters is that something changes in the way in which such a child perceives himself or herself, to that he or she can feel valued by others and (c) a child's behaviour in the classroom is influenced by the responses it elicits, and this in turn influences further responses; the trained professional's response may be a major factor in whether an interaction becomes a virtuous or vicious cycle.

Teachers' lack of psychodynamic insight may lead them to overemphasise the pathological aspects of children's problems. In fact, many educators use psychiatric terms (e.g. syndromes, ADHD etc.) when they discuss children with difficulties. Such terms locate problems in the student rather than the educational system or the interaction between the student and his or her educational environment. These labels can also negatively affect the way that others perceive and interact with students, thereby damaging students' academic prospects and perhaps also their self-esteem. Educators should recognise that no two students are alike and that every educational program must be based on individual strengths and behavioural challenges rather than on a label.

Therefore, an essential component of this type of counselling projects is the 'working alliance' between teachers and counsellors which encompassed both emotional support and the coaching to help teachers manage the intense emotions they experience when working with challenging students (Blocher, 2000; Espelage & Poteat, 2012a; Fell, 2002; Kourkoutas & Xavier, 2010). Indeed, it has been suggested that teachers may become more skilful and aware of the type of intervention their students require if they are supported and trained in tailored interventions (Fell, 2002; Hanko, 2001, 2002; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kourkoutas & Xavier, 2010). Teachers need to

gain more insight into students' problems to overcome their personal prejudices and their negative emotional re-action to difficult students (Fell, 2002; Hanko, 2002).

Conclusions

Teacher acceptance is associated with student psychological adjustment, both in girls and boys (Wang & Eccles, 2012) and with good school conduct (Rohner, 2010); it also has a protective role against depressive symptoms and behavioural problems and promotes resilience and academic achievement (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Murray & Pianta, 2007; Rohner, 2010; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010).

It is however very difficult for teachers to deal successfully with all students who exhibit emotional and behavioural problems; their behaviour may trigger troublesome or negative emotional reactions and attitudes in those who work with them (Kourkoutas & Mouzaki, 2007). Teachers are constantly exposed to emotionally challenging situations. Hence, they may find difficult to model an appropriate conflict-resolution approach for students if emotions, such as frustration, anger, sense of incompetence, are at high level. This may impact on students' ability to internalize and develop these skills (Fleming et al., 2013). In addition, teachers are exposed to families' stress, demands and criticisms; this is an important issue that traditional models of counselling and practice tend to neglect. Teachers need guidance and support to understand how the parental behaviour in cases of difficult students might emotionally affect both them and their relationships with the student and consequently lead them in conflicting confrontation with the student and his/her parents (Danchev, 2010; Kourkoutas, 2012).

Teachers report a deep concern for sustainable emotional support and professional guidance which is usually not recognised or dealt with appropriately by educational psychologists and counsellors (Fell, 2002; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Kourkoutas & Mouzaki, 2007; Schmidt, 2010). Available evidence reveals that teachers should be supported emotionally and provided with psycho-educational training to overcome their stresses, fears, inappropriate defences and prejudices so that they can work creatively to deal with emerging challenges (Elliott & Place, 2012; Hanko, 2002; Kourkoutas, 2012; Levine, 2007).

The available data suggest that counsellors and educational psychologists have a critical role to play in helping teachers, parents and the students with behavioural problems to avoid being 'excluded' from school and develop further mental health problems. It is worth mentioning at this point that a recent study in the UK showed that school-based counselling is associated with significant reductions in psychological distress, comparable with outcomes achieved by traditional child and adolescent mental-health services (Cooper, Pybis, Hill, Jones, & Cromarty, 2013; Danchev, 2010). The counsellor's role as a source of positive support is an essential part of counselling work with teachers aimed at helping them overcome their personal and professional resistance and limitations (Hanko, 2002; Kourkoutas, 2012; Lehr & McComas, 2005; Solomon & Nashat, 2010). When teachers succeed in reducing their difficult and challenging students' (social and academic) exclusion, through a firm collaborative and supportive relationship and individualized educational plan, such students significantly increase their social and academic resilience and feel less prone to disruptive behaviour (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; Danchev, 2010; Goldstein & Brooks, 2007; Kourkoutas, 2012; Levine, 2007; Schmidt, 2010).

In fact, working in a resilient and inclusive-based perspective with teachers (Farrell & Venables, 2009; Paternite, 2005; Urquhart, 2009) means prioritizing a series of social-emotional and educational goals; such goals place emphasis on strengthening the relationships of vulnerable or "problematic" students with their teachers and peers and provide them with the adequate educational support in order to re-engage with academic activities.

In the new paradigm that we advocate, counsellors and educational psychologists should be trained to *contain* teachers' negative emotions, providing a "holding environment" and meaningful guidance to teachers. Furthermore, counsellors and educational psychologists should also learn to take advantage of teacher's resources and knowledge and create conditions favourable to dialectical processes so as to achieve joint solutions that are meaningful for school staff and can be tested, retested and modified to suit a specific school population and environment. In a similar vein, counsellors and educational psychologists should be willing to learn from teachers and parents, and to observe carefully in order to analyse the group dynamics and educational systems in a particular school, and then focus on resolving specific problems or wider issues with the relevant (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013; Schmidt, 2010).

The philosophy of inclusive education and counselling, as has been defined by many researchers and practitioners, is consistent and very close to the philosophy and practice of resilience (Barbarasch & Elias, 2009; Cohen, 2013; Doll, 2013; Hart, Blincow, & Thomas 2007; National Association of School Psychologists, 2010; Urquhart, 2009; Zins & Elias, 2006). In fact, resilient based models are not deficit-centered, as the medical ones; they are rather inclusive in nature, as they focus on exploring and strengthening the positive aspects and components of the child's functioning, emphasizing, at the same time, a system-based and contextual approach. They, therefore, include families and school systems and promote school-community cooperation (Aumann & Hart, 2009).

In concluding, by extending the range of interventions counsellors or educational psychologists offer in schools, they could assume a 'therapeutic presence' to the wider school system, and not just to difficult children (Solomon & Nashat, 2010). School counsellors working in a therapeutic perspective are in a potentially useful position to embed ideas and practice about thinking and learning in schools that can be integrated with existing educational work (Solomon & Nashat, 2010).

Notes

i) In the direct work with "problem" children, this practice might include a series of problem-solving, art-based, or art-therapy techniques, or other psychosocial and psychoeducational interventions, as well as developmentally-based individual counseling with the child.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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