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Greek Primary School Teachers' Narratives About Their Role Negotiation During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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∞ No one can dispute the fact that the teaching profession seemed to be tested during the coronavirus pandemic. Teachers were called upon to perform a difficult and multifaced role, without help and support from the state. The issues that teachers had to respond to and solve are related to their autonomy, their digital literacy competences and their relationships/cooperation with students. The new working conditions terrified teachers, who had to manage their digital classroom through a violent readjustment. Under these circumstances, Greek primary school teachers' narratives offer us their phenomenological perspective on how they coped with their teaching duties during this period of health and educational emergency. An initial attempt is made to empathetically approach the 'world' of four teachers, while the subsequent interpretive and critical analysis serves as a means to illuminate 'hidden' beliefs of their professional role, the reshaping of their identity, and their adaptation to the online teaching context. Through their narratives, the teachers reflect on the issue of the lack of support from the state. They also note that they found it difficult to manage their e-classes in such a short time. Finally, there is a need for more effective preparation of teachers in times of uncertainty and crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19, narratives, primary school teachers, professional identity

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Pripovedi grških osnovnošolskih učiteljev o njihovem pogajanju o lastni vlogi med pandemijo covid-19

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≈ Nihče ne more oporekati dejstvu, da je bil učiteljski poklic med pandemijo koronavirusa na preizkušnji. Učitelji so morali opravljati težko in večplastno vlogo brez pomoči in podpore države. Vprašanja, na katera so se morali učitelji odzvati in jih reševati, so povezana z njihovo avtonomijo, usposobljenostjo za digitalno pismenost in z odnosi/sodelovanjem z učenci. Novi delovni pogoji so učitelje prestrašili, saj so morali svoje digitalne učilnice upravljati z veliko prisilnega prilagajanja. V teh okoliščinah nam pripovedi grških osnovnošolskih učiteljev ponujajo njihov fenomenološki pogled na to, kako so se spopadali s svojimi učiteljskimi dolžnostmi v tem obdobju izrednih zdravstvenih in izobraževalnih razmer. Na začetku se poskušamo empatično približati »svetu« štirih učiteljev, medtem ko poznejša interpretativna in kritična analiza služi kot sredstvo za osvetlitev »skritih« prepričanj o njihovi poklicni vlogi, preoblikovanju njihove identitete in prilagajanju kontekstu spletnega poučevanja. Učitelji s svojimi pripovedmi razmišljajo o vprašanju pomanjkanja podpore države. Ugotavljajo tudi, da so v tako kratkem času težko obvladovali svoje e-učilnice. Nazadnje se kaže tudi potreba po učinkovitejši pripravi učiteljev med negotovostjo in krizo.

Ključne besede: covid-19, pripovedi, osnovnošolski učitelji, poklicna identiteta

Introduction

Man is in a dynamic relationship with his environment, which helps him to mobilise internally and to actively engage in a continuous process of searching, creating and shaping situations (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). If we look at the case of teachers in particular, we understand that uncertainty is a kind of endemic disease for them, a disease that occurs with frequency and duration in their profession and forces them to adapt to new working conditions (Lortie, 2002). This uncertainty permeates all professional areas, such as: (1) the didactic area, as the teacher should constantly adapt to the teaching needs of his/her students, (2) the practical area, through the employment of the appropriate teaching methods and tools, and (3) the interaction area, referring to the need to create favourable relationships with students and parents (Munthe, 2001). Through the closure of schools, the coronavirus pandemic created or illuminated new conditions of uncertainty that 'shook' the needs of teachers for autonomy, competence and effectiveness (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Teachers were globally called upon to immediately handle a situation with which they had not previously come into contact (Kim & Asbury, 2020). They had to familiarise themselves with distance learning, to inform students and parents accordingly, and to adapt their teaching, their lessons and their teaching material by utilising pedagogically appropriate digital tools (Flores & Gago, 2020). Undoubtedly, teachers were faced with an unprecedented situation of redefining their professional identity through a different form of teaching, with new media channels of communication, newly adapted material and new forms of evaluation (König et al., 2020).

This situation created tremors and change in the professional trajectory of teachers; in other words, it led to a professional rupture. It also magnified issues of self-efficacy and satisfaction in the workplace by meeting specific needs, mainly of a psychological nature. For this reason, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) can be useful in understanding the experience of today's teachers in their working lives (Hobson & Maxwell, 2017). According to this theory, three basic psychological needs are taken into account for the better functioning of employees and their satisfaction in the workplace (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Autonomy is the first basic need (e.g., Do I have the autonomy to choose how I will work?). The teacher is satisfied in his/her workplace when s/he acts and behaves with a degree of freedom, which allows him/her to appropriate the elements of his/her workplace naturally and according to his/her own will (Trougakos et al., 2013). The teacher is autonomous when not being forced to do something imposed on him/her by external factors. However, even if asked

to do something that may be beyond his/her duties, if the teacher is happy to do it, then this degree of autonomy is still maintained (Fadaee et al., 2022; Reeve & Halusic, 2009).

Competence is the second key component in this theory (e.g., Do I feel competent and adequate in my work?). It is important that the teacher feels a sense of effectiveness and expertise, a sense of mastery over the environment, which helps him/her to cultivate new competences and transformatively shape his/her knowledge background (e.g., cognitive skills, digital media skills) (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Being adequate is related to the teacher's external and internal motivation. Research shows, for instance, the positive effect of verbal praise on employees in their workplace. This is also linked to self-efficacy, which is considered the primary principle of motivation (Bandura, 1977).

Relatedness is the third basic psychological need. The coverage of this need leads to a high degree of satisfaction in working life (e.g., Do I feel that I belong to a team at work?). The literature shows that if the teacher feels a sense of being able and willing to be cared for, then s/he will reap benefits in his/her work (Chiu, 2021). This is fundamentally related to the teacher's sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This need is met when people see themselves as part of a team, experiencing a sense of community and developing close professional relationships.

Focusing on the third psychological need, one question that arises concerns "whether teachers felt this need during the pandemic" (Shah, 2021). This is because relationships are central in the teaching profession, with implications for both students and teachers (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Veldmana et al., 2013). At the beginning of this unsettled social and educational situation, there was a sense of disconnection and isolation of teachers from colleagues and students, as they worked remotely, something that may have had a negative effect on their psychology (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

The above factors are linked to the way teachers – and their students – operate in the school environment, as well as to their motivation to teach (Abós et al., 2019), to their views on stress and burnout (Rubilar & Oros, 2021), to students' motivation to participate in teaching, and to students' wellbeing (Poulou, 2020). According to the SDT, an important role is played by what motivates employees, through the coverage of specific needs (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Of course, it is worth investigating the extent of motivation that helps employees or stands in the way of progress, achievement and coverage of corresponding needs (Diefendorff & Chandler, 2011).

Role renegotiation: The case of teachers in times of crisis

Focusing on teachers, it is important to renegotiate their role as employees and professionals towards change, innovation and compliance to new professional conditions (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014). It becomes apparent that some teachers are less positive and adaptive to change in the educational process (Van der Heijden et al., 2015). On the one hand, they may realise that something needs to change and become more flexible, even during the pandemic, because this will benefit their students cognitively. On the other hand, however, there is a defensive attitude, or an attitude of refusal towards change and remote teaching, due to emotional and psychological factors (Sokal et al., 2020). Teachers who, for example, resist change may feel less effective when teaching with the help of digital tools (Alanoglu et al., 2022; Labbas & Shaban, 2013); they may feel that they are moving away from something they knew and did well or, in other words, away from their comfort zone.

As a result, feelings of insecurity, lack of satisfaction, anxiety, burnout, refusal to continue working under such conditions or even resignation appear. Such symptoms in the workplace appear to be associated with non-functional social relationships between students and teachers, as well as with reduced school performance (Klusmann et al., 2016). This situation also presupposes the provision of adequate technological equipment to the ‘facilitators’ of this alternative form of education. The effectiveness of the teacher is clearly affected by the above factors and by the possibilities they and their students have to access digital devices, a functional internet connection, digital tools and educational platforms (Nikolopoulou & Kousloglou, 2022).

Teachers who were called upon to face critical situations in education and in their classrooms not only had to keep pace with the rapid changes, but to renegotiate their role as well. In essence, it is a question of readjusting the role and renegotiating the identity of the teacher in the light of such a crisis. One of the main questions teachers asked during this period is “how will I adapt to a new role that has new responsibilities?” (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). This question is even more dramatic if we are confronted with the real conditions in Greece. Unlike teachers in other countries, Greek teachers had no previous experience in e-learning, and it seems that they were not familiar with digital tools or did not know how to further their use (Jimoyiannis et al., 2021).

In Europe, the conditions prevailing in education were similar to those prevailing in Greece, with measures that did not favour the effectiveness of education and teachers who were not trained and prepared for distance learning. What is certain is that teachers were called upon to deal with a situation that

left no room for 'spacious' and careful planning (Azorin, 2020; Ferraro et al., 2020). This only concerns the first grace period when schools were closed. Unfortunately, the situation did not improve noticeably, even with the return to schools in the new 2020/2021 school year (Whalen, 2020). In several countries, including Greece, governments did not benefit from the albeit brief experience of the first attempt at distance learning. A form of education that was mainly asynchronous for some teachers was non-existent for others, as they never connected to any platform. Unfortunately, during the first lockdown, no official instruction was ever given, a situation that also brings to the surface issues of social and educational inequalities (Hargreaves, 2021).

Method

The core question that the present research attempts to answer is how Greek teachers experienced the situation of the Covid-19 health crisis. Specifically, the key questions this qualitative research aspires to answer are: How do teachers interpret the situation they experienced when they were called upon to teach with a contribution of digital technologies during the coronavirus pandemic regarding the factor of autonomy? What do teachers report regarding the adequacy of the preparation and knowledge they possessed to cope with the new working conditions? How do teachers, through their 'realities', discuss issues of the emotional component and support from institutions?

Based on the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Willig, 2012), the research focuses on teachers' voices and an idiographic approach. The researcher seeks to interpret the data with reference exclusively to the subject and his/her lived experience. The research focuses on the life narratives of the sample, exploring how the respondents, recalling experiences of their working lives – through their own 'realities' – interpret and process what happened when they were invited to teach through distance learning (Serdedakis & Tsiolis, 2000).

Specifically, the first stage of IPA involves multiple readings of transcripts of interviews. At this stage, the researcher takes notes related to thoughts and concerns regarding the phenomenon s/he is examining. Through this process, descriptive comments on teachers' subjective experience emerge, as well as conceptual comments related to the interpretation of the context of the research participants' experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

The study's sample consisted of four teachers, with the researcher approaching the participants via snowball sampling. According to IPA, the researcher is not interested in large samples, but rather in having access to the 'biota' of each teacher. The first interview took place with a teacher who was a student in a postgraduate programme in which the researcher participated as a lecturer. This teacher then became the 'link' to the other participants. All of the participating teachers serve in public primary schools in Greece (Thessaly, Macedonia and Athens). Specifically, the sample comprised two substitute teachers with less than ten years of experience in education, a permanent teacher with thirteen years of experience, and a permanent special education teacher with fifteen years of experience.

Instrument

The data were collected through a qualitative semi-structured interview instrument. The interview script consisted of three basic dimensions, taking into account the relevant theory and the purpose of the research: (a) support and autonomy of teachers during distance teaching, (b) knowledge and (digital) skills of teachers, and (c) feelings and experiences from teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research instrument included fourteen open questions. For the present publication, the data centres around the following open-ended questions: What did you feel during the period when you had to teach remotely? How was the experience? How did you execute your lesson through a digital platform? Did you need to work with colleagues? From which institutions did you have support with your teaching?

Research design

A biographical approach was chosen as the most appropriate because, through a phenomenological perspective, the researcher was interested in discussing the way in which the participants reconstruct their narratives and reposition themselves through retrospective accounts and reflections (Stanley, 2016). The researcher transcribed the teachers' narratives and categorised the material based on research questions and key points of the Self-Determination Theory. Each interview was coded separately, with the words of the teachers following the triptych: (a) autonomy in the workplace, (b) knowledge of and familiarity with digital tools, and (c) support from the state and colleagues. Through this research process, the participating teachers attempt to discuss, reflect on and find their place within this new work-related context (Tsiolis & Siouti, 2023). In such a situation of personal disorganisation due to the change

in their professional conditions, a so-called biographical rupture occurs – a radical change in their daily lives – along with the redefinition of the identity of today's teachers (Tsiolis, 2012).

In the present research, taking into account the stages of IPA, the thoughts recorded by the researcher are subject to a deductive approach and the themes arise based on the Self-Determination Theory. From the sub-themes, as shown below, the main themes 'autonomy' (Table 1), 'competence' (Table 2) and 'relatedness' (Table 3) were created through the teachers' self-reports.

Table 1

Main theme 1: Autonomy

Sub-themes	Self-reports
Students as motivation	<i>I wanted to work with the kids</i>
Love for work	<i>It was enjoyable, as difficult as it was</i>
Comparison with other teachers	<i>The other teachers didn't want to</i>
Pressures from on high	<i>I felt pressure from the school guidance counsellor</i>
Teachers as facilitators	<i>I was the one who told colleagues a few things</i>
Commitment	<i>I had to (...)</i>
Other reference groups	<i>We had to get involved with families</i>
External motivation	<i>be exposed (...)/Salary reduction/Sanctions</i>
Accountability	<i>Will they evaluate us?</i>

Table 2

Main Theme 2: Competence

Sub-themes	Self-reports
ICT familiarity	<i>I handle computers comfortably</i>
Lack of ICT knowledge	<i>I wasn't that good</i>
ICT readiness	<i>I'm not afraid of the computer/I was more ready and felt safe</i>
Update knowledge	<i>Take lessons to improve skills/(...) required skills</i>
Insecurity	<i>I felt hanging out all the time</i>
Self-efficacy	<i>I definitely improved</i>
Psychological benefits	<i>I felt proud/I felt affirmed</i>
Parents' positive views	<i>Parents came to thank me</i>

Table 3*Main Theme 3: Relatedness*

Sub-themes	Self-reports
Mutual support	<i>It is important to have contact with other teachers There was constant communication</i>
Informal cooperation network	<i>Anyone who knew had to help/We were relieved that a colleague came and showed us</i>
Lack of supporting educational material	<i>Suitable material was not given to us</i>
Lack of support from institutions	<i>I felt the support was lacking</i>
Depersonalisation	<i>Alone</i>

Each biographical interview lasted from 40 to 60 minutes and was conducted online in March and April 2021 using the Skype platform and audio recording. To make it easier for the teachers, key points were noted in a Word document. Furthermore, ethical issues were respected in the research. The respondents were informed of the nature of the research through a cover letter sent to them by the researcher via email. The teachers consented and signed the relevant form, thus accepting their participation.

Results

First teacher: "I felt threatened by the Ministry of Education rather than supported."

The first teacher, a substitute teacher, recalls the difficulties she encountered under the new conditions, as she felt insecure and without any guidance or specific instructions. This also raises the issue of autonomy referred to in the SDT and relates it to misinformation regarding working and economic conditions for teachers. The teacher felt alone, without any help from the state. It is worth mentioning that she uses the word 'hanging'. As a counterbalance to fear, uncertainty and the feeling of insecurity and depersonalisation, she employs her inner motivation to help her students feel that they belong somewhere (Martí-González, 2023). This is, therefore, linked to the third factor affecting workplace satisfaction. Despite the fact that she was not satisfied in terms of the autonomy element of the SDT theory, she was motivated by her professionalism and by the feeling that she belongs or should belong somewhere:

"In the first lockdown no decision was made, nothing about education. It was not mandatory. We had no instructions. I felt insecure. Alone inside

four walls. We were all scared. I felt bad (...). Amid the doubt and fear of the pandemic, which was something unknown to all of us, there was misinformation about salary cuts if we did not engage in distance teaching. We didn't know how long this would last. If school was going to open (...). Everyone was unprepared; as a result, the training seminars were inadequate, unorganised, ineffective. No one was prepared, not even the state (...). Of course, I engaged in distance teaching, because I was teaching sixth graders and I wanted to work with the children and prepare them for secondary school. I was working; I didn't stop at all. I thought distance teaching could help my students keep in touch. I realised that this connection was helping them. They were happy to see their classmates.”

Through her narrative, the teacher emphasises the division between young teachers and those with many years of service in education, which connects to the second SDT factor. On the one hand, there are teachers who adequately handle digital media and e-learning tools, while, on the other hand, there are teachers who find it difficult, 'give up' and feel ineffective. These new conditions also brought to the fore disagreements, as the teacher underlines. She gives a harsher characterisation of the school, mentioning the word 'camp', stating that teachers were divided into two 'camps' depending on their experience in using technology. This issue is also linked to teachers' epistemological assumptions about learning and teaching (Winter et al., 2021). The teacher raises the issue of reward, that is, confirmation from other reporting groups and specifically from the parents of her students. This issue is directly related to a high sense of effectiveness. As stated in relevant research, the factor of competence is linked to support from the teacher's environment. Despite her proficiency in digital media, the first teacher, who works in a primary school, notes that she learned more.

“The teachers were divided. It was like we were divided into two camps (...). Certainly, the teachers who did not want to engage in distance teaching were not bothered with this part, offering neither to help nor to teach. We young teachers think we are quite comfortable using computers and can manage technology. Older teachers avoided distance teaching because they were afraid of it. They didn't know how to handle digital tools. Distance teaching required skills that I believe all young people possess. When we returned to school after three lockdowns, parents came to thank me. That was touching. They felt their children would not be able to progress through distance learning, but they realised that we were working and there were no gaps. This served as a confirmation of my work. I thought I had succeeded. I felt proud that my work was being praised. Despite the

doubts I had, I kept going and even felt that I became more comfortable with several online tools. I learned more things.”

For this teacher, it was of great importance that an informal network of mutual aid, cooperation and experimentation was created, mainly by her colleagues. The school's computer science teacher offered support and helped teachers to feel safe. However, the teacher interviewed stresses that there was no support from the state, on the part of the Ministry of Education. This situation contributed negatively to teachers' sense of isolation (Wong et al., 2022). The interviewee mentions that she was alone in all of this.

“Colleagues were helping each other. Yes, we worked together. I remember we had a meeting. The computer science teacher had informed us about all of the computer tools. It was easy, but having someone who already knew the tools in this stressful and unprecedented situation made us feel relieved. When I created my digital class in the ‘e-me’ platform, I collaborated with a colleague. We joined each other’s digital classes and experimented before starting with our students. I feel lucky because I’ve been working with amazing colleagues all these years. On the other hand, I felt threatened by the Ministry of Education rather than supported. Manuals of the appropriate platforms were posted, but there were no clear instructions for compulsory or non-compulsory distance teaching. We were not informed about personal data, what was going on with the platform, so we were afraid to turn on cameras, especially those of the children. There was uncertainty about everything. I really felt that everyone was so scared and isolated that almost no one communicated with anyone. I was alone for three months.”

Second teacher: *“It was a period of teaching in the dark. I was a little scared about my role.”*

The second school teacher describes her teaching experience during the coronavirus pandemic as one of fear of the unknown, characterising it as a period of ‘darkness’. She discusses the issue of (re)negotiating her professional identity (Melon, 2022), which seems to be of particular concern to her. Her narrative seems like an internal dialogue, completely raw and ideographical. She states that she felt insecure, lacking the autonomy she needed to be able to function professionally. The teacher prioritises the needs of her students and feels satisfied with the ‘praise’ she received from her students’ parents. The other reference groups therefore seem to influence and determine, to a large extent, the teacher’s sense of self-efficacy.

“In general, it was a bit terrifying at the beginning. There was no framework, there was no ‘Webex’, no platform. It was a period of teaching in the dark. I was a little scared about my role. I thought to myself: What’s happening now? Should I do what I have to do? How do I know it will help my students? Should I record a video and send it? After some time, teacher training started (...). If I remember correctly, the first seminar by the Ministry took place at the end of distance teaching, that is, after we had returned to schools. Schools had opened normally and then they trained us (...). But I felt proud. Do you know when? When the parents came to me at the end of the year and said, “What would we do without you?” This is actually an acknowledgement. And finally, at the end of the year the parents told me: “You know, you helped us with your videos, well done to you because nobody does that.” That’s when I felt what I did was okay!”

The teacher considers that she is well acquainted with digital tools. This fact seemed to facilitate her distance teaching. Besides, as she notes, her teaching practice did not change significantly, as she had used similar means in her teaching before the pandemic. The only thing that changed is that she engaged in a process of self-education, searching for relevant material on the internet to support her students even more (Daniel, 2020). She seems to have been quite supportive with her colleagues, offering her help especially to teachers who had several years of experience in education. She believes that teachers who were either not positive about technology or had different assumptions about teaching hindered the work of other teachers.

“At first I didn’t think about it in a negative way. Because I utilise technology in class – we often used the projector, the computer, we listened to songs – the students were also well acquainted with these processes. So, when we did it remotely, I showed them what we saw in class anyway. So, it’s not that I felt blurred or that I struggled. I searched on the internet, on YouTube, I saw videos of colleagues and how these platforms work (...). In fact, I was the one who told my colleagues some things, because they were older and they encountered great difficulties at first. I think the most important factor for them was the stress about teaching, because they had no technological skills. My mother-in-law, for example, was teaching third graders. She was anxious because she lacked technological knowledge. Of course, those who didn’t know were holding us back.”

The relatedness factor, as the third key element in the SDT, plays an important role for the teacher. Specifically, through her reflections, the second

teacher focuses on issues of support from both colleagues and state agencies (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Regarding support from the other teachers, she notes cooperation as an important factor in overcoming obstacles during the coronavirus period, but at the same time she does not hide the fact that the situation was quite tiring. Support from institutions is also not mentioned. On the contrary, the primary school teacher repeats that the teachers did what they did on their own. She notes that coordinators provided them with help, which was of importance.

“When all of this happened, no one was ready. To tell you the truth, I was more ready and I felt safe. Most of all, colleagues helped by uploading videos on how to handle the platforms, in mutual support. I tried to help, but then I realised that I was on the computer all day long doing my own work and then helping my colleagues. It was very, very difficult to work together. I felt that no one was helping me. As I told you before, training took place later on. Alone we made it in the beginning and we struggled, both those who knew and those who did not. Only the coordinators tried to hold online meetings to show us how to work. In that sense, yes, there was a kind of response from our primary schools. They organised seminars.”

The teacher emphasises the issue of face-to-face interaction and teacher-student communication. In particular, the absence of face-to-face communication creates ‘cracks’ in relationships. She also mentions that such a situation leads to depersonalisation, even ‘resignation’ or emotional exhaustion: *“It’s one thing to wake up, go to work, talk to your colleagues, see the children hugging you, have contact, but another thing is this cold situation, being necessarily far from each other. It goes without saying that ‘I gave up’. I report that clearly about myself, because I was tired psychologically and physically.”*

Third teacher: “There was anxiety about what we should do.”

The third case is that of a newly appointed teacher, who focuses on the third factor that has a noticeable impact on her satisfaction in the workplace. She also devotes a large part of her narrative to her psychology, as well as that of her students. In other words, she focuses on the psychological component and the communication she had with students during the coronavirus pandemic (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). The teacher proposes contact with her students and then discusses the cognitive aspect in the context of distance teaching. To compensate for the lack of help and support from the state, she notes the supportive role that teachers had to play at the time.

“At first we didn’t know what to do or what to teach. We weren’t given any instructions. At first it was a bit of a shock for everyone. I thought that the role of the teacher should change. We had to focus more on the psychology of the children, to stand by them. We should adopt a more supportive role and we should probably put aside the learning part a little. I thought that this was the direction, that we need to be next to the children, to help, to make them aware of what is happening and that it will pass quickly. So that’s where I focused, I think. This meant communicating with the students every day. During the first lockdown, I had better communication with them using Viber, images, photos. Everything I could do was by using a digital book, online games and quizzes. This was not as much about lessons as it was about psychological support, about spending time pleasantly, away from school.”

The teacher’s familiarity with technology, at least before the health crisis, was not at a high level. Along with a lack of familiarity with digital tools and e-learning platforms, symptoms of anxiety and insecurity appeared. As a result, she was either helped by ‘ready-made’ material she searched for online or material her colleagues provided her with. She particularly emphasises how much the attitude of parents influenced her teaching. She encountered difficulty in dealing with this new situation, with parents who were either sceptical or negative, and with parents who intervened in the online educational process. She experienced unpleasant feelings; she did not agree with being ‘exposed’ to the eyes of parents while obliged to teach through a platform. This is inextricably linked to the first factor that affects teachers’ sense of satisfaction, the factor of autonomy. In other words, teachers were asked to teach under these ‘strange’ conditions, without agreeing – or being trained – to do so, thus shaping their teaching practices under the ‘watchful eye’ of other reference groups (Rousoulioti et al., 2022).

“There was anxiety about what to do. I may have had some material, but I also found a lot of material from colleagues online. And maybe there was less material that I created. At the very beginning, during the first lockdown, when I had four classes, it was very difficult to find so much material. I worked long hours – longer than when I was at school – to find my material (...). I wasn’t that good. I had to learn to handle some things on the computer that I hadn’t been aware of. I had to search a lot, but it wasn’t an obstacle for me. The obstacle was my cooperation with parents, where you had to convince them of certain things. I don’t like the fact that we had to get so involved with families and to be so exposed. Suddenly you

were exposed to the eyes of all of the parents and relatives, and you listened to their comments. It wasn't very easy."

The third interviewee considers that teachers were not supported enough, but were left to teach without proper and timely guidance and infrastructure. She agrees with her colleagues involved in the present research and gives us her reflection on a situation that seems to have worked – at best – on 'autopilot'. Each teacher taught based on his/her own internet searches, with the informal support of colleagues, dedicating time beyond normal teaching hours even for technical issues, e.g., to help children log in to the platform with their passwords.

"There was no help. No help from the state. Infrastructure, as I said before, did not exist. Should we give laptops, tablets? When? We didn't have the necessary equipment at schools to give to students. Secondly, we weren't given material suitable for the platforms. We had to search for the material, we had to find out how the platforms work, we had to register the children. Parents were not properly informed to be able to register students, so we did it, as you have probably heard, we did everything at midnight, when the platform was operational. So, nobody provided us with help for that either. And also, the training programmes came so late and I don't know why. No, we didn't have help. I can't recall anything that helped me, other than some instructions that I had to read and to sign in to the platform."

Fourth teacher: "I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to meet the demands of the children and parents."

The fourth participant is a special education teacher with more than ten years of experience in education. Through her many years of experience in school classes, she describes her own reality drawing on her experience, ideographically and phenomenologically. The teacher does not conceal the fact that anxiety was the first emotion that overwhelmed her and states that she did not feel the autonomy she needed to be satisfied. She felt pressure, as she had to adapt in a short time to something she did not know. In a conflicting process between the needs of her students, being effective in her work and the 'sanctions' that were said to be imposed on teachers, she was scared and pressured.

"The dominant emotion was anxiety about the situation and how lessons would be conducted. I also felt pressure that we should use specific platforms for online learning in a certain way, and at the same time everything

had to be done very quickly and without guidance. And all of this was a mess in my mind (...). Yes, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to meet the demands of the children and parents. Of course, this was probably my own personal fear. But there was also a vague fear, because there were various rumours circulating that all of this would be evaluated, that we would be evaluated."

Throughout her narrative, the teacher returns to the role of the teachers and what it means to teach in different contexts, depending on circumstances that are defined each time. She seems to be concerned with her self-image and self-efficacy issues (Assidiq et al., 2021). In the context of this reflection, she prioritises social interaction and communication with her students. She wanted to support both the children and their parents, which is probably necessary in the case of special schools.

"I was already aware that the teaching profession is more than just providing students with information or with knowledge or whatever, but this became clearer in the midst of the pandemic. All teachers were called upon to play the role of psychologist. We were called upon to empower and support psychologically both children and in some cases their parents. Also, I realised that face-to-face interaction with students is very important. In the beginning, I had planned to do my teaching as normally as I could, to focus on learning as well. The children themselves wanted this contact."

Like the other teachers involved in the research, the fourth teacher stresses the fact that the process followed had elements of forced self-education. She searched for material, experimented with platforms and gradually managed to support her students. She adds that there was not a supportive environment, at least on the part of the computer science teacher. The only support came from the coordinator, with the sharing of relevant educational audiovisual material. She admits that this situation was very sudden and 'justifies' the Ministry and its actions, at least in the first period of distance teaching, but she then declares her disappointment in a 'cruel' way. Specifically, she reports that the required actions were not taken by the state and that education policy-makers did not make use of the time they had and the relative experience from distance learning.

"I was also trying to do my best, without having the knowledge, and trying to find how these platforms work. I had never used them before. That was the dominant feeling. Of course, over time, we got in line, I found my feet. Yes, I felt that the support we received was incomplete. Specifically, in my own school, while we were normally supposed to have the support of the

computer science teacher, he was absent from us throughout the lockdown, he did not communicate with us at all. Afterwards, I found some videos on YouTube regarding the platforms. So, there was no support, apart from the training videos sent to us by the coordinator. This is understandable in the case of the first lockdown, because it happened abruptly and caught us by surprise, both the Ministry and all of the relevant bodies. In the middle of the summer, however, there were no opportunities for training.”

Discussion

The transition period from face-to-face teaching to distance teaching should be an occasion for discussion on a new basis of the issue of teacher professionalisation in the modern digital age (Van der Spoel et al., 2020). The education and training of teachers in times of crisis (Reissmannová, 2021) should be discussed very seriously and planned, with adjustments (Symeonidis, 2015). I firmly believe that education has a continuous dynamic and must be regularly adjusted whether we refer to times of crisis or not. Such an unsettled period, as illustrated by the narratives of the teachers in the present research, clearly did not provide an opportunity to organise efforts to utilise digital technologies, as the conditions, the guidelines of education policy and the support that existed from institutions did not favour coordinated policy.

If we take into account the literature, which provides encouraging data regarding our students (Rafsanjani et al., 2022), who are receptive to digital education and familiar with digital technologies, we will be able to think of ways to include our teachers in this ‘game’ (Aslan & Chang, 2015). The first issue is how to provide our teachers with digital knowledge and skills that support the educational process. Secondly, we need to determine how to shape – transformatively, dynamically and evolutionarily – a professional teacher who is able to adapt to the conditions, co-shape his/her educational framework and be protected by a legal framework, with professional rights that separate him/her and ensure his/her relative distance from other reference groups.

From this perspective, regarding the experience of teachers, it is clear that teachers did not feel autonomous, as they were called upon to teach in an unknown context in a short time and without support. It is also evident that teachers, especially younger teachers, despite their knowledge and experience in the use of digital technologies, felt fear and insecurity. This is because there were no directions, but only informal support from their colleagues (Pressley & Ha, 2021). Finally, it is evident that, in this situation, our teachers had to be effective while being alone, without feeling a ‘connection’.

The present research reveals that we have teachers who are conscientious and do their best without the commitment of time. Teachers are concerned about their students and the promotion of the educational process, about the cognitive and social-emotional aspect of teaching their students. We have teachers with various levels of digital knowledge and skills, some of whom feel more self-confident and autonomous, while others feel insecure and uncertain (*"I have a good relationship with technology", "I wasn't that good. I had to learn to handle some things on the computer that I didn't know", "In fact, I was the one who told colleagues some things", "I don't know if I did it in the best way"*).

However, we cannot only rely on the effort of teachers to search for material on digital portals and respective platforms on their own, on an informal support framework that teachers create themselves (e.g., online support groups on social media, for platforms and digital educational material in the context of distance teaching); we must support them through professional frameworks. This can be done with correspondingly flexible curricula at all levels, with rich educational material adapted to the conditions, with functional training platforms, and with continuous focused and contextualised education and training.

Conclusion

During the Covid-19 pandemic, some teachers crossed over to the other 'bank', beyond their narrow public employment duties. They did this because they felt obliged to help their students, and they found ways to accomplish this. Some teachers 'lost track' of time and devoted many more hours to searching for material and preparing lessons through distance learning. Some teachers focused on correcting assignments and sending comments and audio files with feedback, communicating with parents and students, sometimes even late at night. All of this cannot leave us apathetic; we have to take a stand and discuss the issue of the professionalisation of teachers in relation to receiving support from institutions and the state.

The present research results cannot, however, be generalised. The limitations of this qualitative study concern the small sample of Greek teachers. Future research could focus on this issue through a representative sample of Greek teachers by combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.

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