

## **PERCEPTIONS OF PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY TEACHERS UPON THE IN-SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMMES FROM CYPRUS**

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### **Abstract**

*The main objective of this study consists in the investigation of the perceptions of pre-primary and primary teachers from Cyprus upon the continuous training programmes. The teachers were asked to evaluate the selected ideas for the innovation of the existing in-service training scheme. For this purpose, two focus groups were built, one consisting of primary education teachers and the other one of pre-primary education teachers. The information gathered in these focus groups will be proposed for developing innovative training programmes for teachers in Cyprus, as well as being a determinant of the information that must be addressed during the design of future in-service training.*

**Key words:** focus-group, perceptions, pre-primary and primary teachers

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### **Focus Group instrument development**

Conducting interviews with Cypriot in-service teachers provided some ideas for the introduction of new practices in the training programmes according to their needs and interests. These were the sources for designing the questions to be used in the focus groups (Morgan, 1997). The questions were divided into three categories: a) training methodology & form of training programmes, b) training content and c) structure & access to training programmes. The first category consisted of six questions, the second and third consisted of nine questions each.

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### Participant recruitment

Two focus groups were conducted during May 2013. The first was comprised of teachers of pre-primary education and the second of teachers of primary education. Efforts were made to recruit teachers from different schools during the in-service training programmes provided by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus, as teachers from all around the island gather together for the purpose of these programmes. This was not possible due to the absence of training programmes during the period of the focus groups. As a result, the focus groups were conducted in schools; a pre-primary school and a primary school. The participating schools were proposed by the Director of the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus. The school principals of the schools were ready to cooperate and the participating teachers were selected according to their willingness to get involved, as well as their years of service.

The first focus group consisted of seven teachers and the second of six teachers. They were not arranged to be gender specific and both groups were comprised of female teachers only.

1.1. Date	1.2. District	1.3. Number of teachers
1.4. 09/05/13	1.5. Nicosia	1.6. 7
1.7. 24/05/13	1.8. Nicosia	1.9. 6

1.9.1. Focus Group 1							
1.9.2. Teacher code	1.9.3. 1.1	1.9.4. 1.2	1.9.5. 1.3	1.9.6. 1.4	1.9.7. 1.5	1.9.8. 1.6	1.9.9. 1.7
1.9.10. Years of Service	1.9.11. 3	1.9.12. 15	1.9.13. 5	1.9.14. 3	1.9.15. 11	1.9.16. 22	1.9.17. 5

1.9.18. Focus Group 2						
1.9.19. Teacher code	1.9.20. 2.1	1.9.21. 2.2	1.9.22. 2.3	1.9.23. 2.4	1.9.24. 2.5	1.9.25. 2.6
1.9.26. Years of Service	1.9.27. 24	1.9.28. 14	1.9.29. 16	1.9.30. 15	1.9.31. 20	1.9.32. 15

All focus groups were conducted in Greek and lasted approximately 50 minutes. Each focus group discussion was tape recorded and later transcribed.

### **Focus group discussion results**

The participants were asked questions related to the *training methodology and the form of in-service training programmes*:

**Training offered by skilled teachers:** Firstly, the participants were asked to give their opinion about being trained by other skilled teachers who would itinerate in nearby schools. All of the respondents appeared to be positive about this idea; some of them said that this would be something good under specific conditions. The following are representative responses:

*'This part is very important, to have the opportunity to talk to a teacher that has applied something new.'*

*'It is very important for me to see the practice, for example someone to come work in cooperation with me and with the kids in the class.'*

*'It would be better to organize co-teaching with him/her. It would be a good proposal.'*

**One generation of teachers teaches another generation:** The participants were asked how they liked the idea of one generation of teachers being trained on a specific subject – matter and then transferring their knowledge to a second generation of teachers, and for this to continue for up to three generations. As many teachers had the experience of similar practices, the majority of them expressed their opposition to this practice:

*'I disagree. It is not the same compared to your own observation of the subject.'*

*'Everyone has different perceptions.'* *'It was too much information at once.'*

Some of the respondents consider it to be a helpful and necessary practice in spite of the fact that there are some deficiencies compared to direct training:

*'Some gaps exist, however you can't train all the teachers of one school in all subjects.'*

*'We obtained too much out of it.'*

Participants of focus group 1 (pre-primary teachers) appeared to be more negative towards the idea compared to the participants of focus group 2 (primary teachers).

**Clinical supervision:** When the participants were asked whether they would like to invite an officer of the Ministry of Education to observe their teaching and consult with them for the improvement of their practices, the initial reaction was negative:

*'It is not helpful. It is stressful.'*

*'The idea of observation does not help us. The feeling of having someone observing you is so different.'*

When the discussion continued, more teachers were persuaded about the usefulness of this process and expressed some positive attitudes towards it. However, almost all of them said that it would be positive and helpful in specific terms and conditions, mostly if applied in small schools and for young teachers:

*'Maybe for young teachers.', 'Maybe in small schools.', 'Only if it were co-teaching.'*

*'I would feel more comfortable if he/she helped me organize the lesson.'*

**Involvement of academics:** The participants were asked whom they preferred as trainers during the in-service training programmes. Most of them replied that they would prefer someone who has teaching experience in primary and pre-primary school: *'We prefer people who have classroom experience.'* *'They need to have a minimum of years of service and classroom experience.'* *'The trainers shouldn't be detached from their schools for many years and these positions should be recycled.'*

Some participants said that academics are different from teachers in some ways: *'Teachers have a different perspective than academics who see everything positively.'* *'Teachers lack new knowledge and theories. Academics have this, but they are in an office and see things differently as they don't have classroom experience.'* *'The way academics and teachers think varies.'*

When the participants were asked if some meetings between academics and teachers should be organized they seemed positive about this idea: *'It would be a positive experience because new knowledge would be acquired in schools.'* *'It is useful because theory and didactics are combined and both teachers and academics are able to accept it.'* *'We could obtain some ideas from research, new methods.'*

Teachers don't seem to like the idea of excluding academics from their training. They prefer to have contact with academics for the modernization of their practices, however they request trainers with classroom experience and who know how they feel and what problems they face.

*'Maybe teachers who had previously been educated by academics is the best solution.'*  
*'Academics send students in schools who apply new theories and teachers are helped by this.'*

**Observation of teaching:** When the participants were asked for their opinion on observations of teachings, the overwhelming response was that this is a helpful practice. Either an observation of teaching in real time or tape-recorded teaching appears to be useful for teachers. As they said: *'...because you are able to criticize the teaching. And if there is innovation in the teaching we can watch how this is applied, especially as new teachers.'* *'...I watched how an idea was applied. I got the main idea of it and applied it myself in my own way.'* *'It is useful to observe other teachers.'*

A few participants seemed to be worried about the effectiveness of this practice: *'You get some ideas but you are not able to apply them.'* *'It depends on how the instructor will present the new idea and if he/she will combine it with other ideas.'* One participant expressed her preference for observing someone working in her class with her own students: *'I would prefer someone to come and work with my pupils while I watch.'*

In the second part of the focus groups the participants were asked questions related to the **content of the training programmes**:

**Participatory training methods (experiential learning, action research, project, constructivist methods):** When asked if they want to engage in participatory training methods during their training, most of the participants responded positively: *'Experiential learning is quite interesting.'* *'We prefer to have an active role.'* *'Teachers to be in the place of students would be a nice thing.'*

Several respondents said that these methods, especially action research and the project method, are helpful under some conditions related to their adaptation to the teachers' and schools' needs and problems: *'Action research and project methods are good if they solve problems of the school.'* *'Action research and projects must refer to real problems of the school which need to be solved.'* *'Both the school and the teachers should make profit out of action research and projects.'* *'If teachers set the subject then we definitely would like to get involved.'*

Very few participants opposed the idea because, as they said, these methods are difficult to implement and require skilled trainers.

**Reflective practices:** When asked if it is a good practice to apply reflective practices in the training programmes, the majority of the participants responded that this is a useful method as you have the opportunity to listen to other teachers' opinions, your practice is being analysed and sometimes problems are being solved: *'There is an exchange of views.'* *'Problems may often be solved by exchanging views.'* *'It would be positive because you have the opportunity to analyse your practice, you listen to other opinions and you can improve and adjust for better results.'*

Some participants responded that it is better if the reflective practices took place at the school level among colleagues of the same school: *'It is much easier if I sit with two or three colleagues and discuss, unofficially.'* *'Maybe, at the end of the school year we should have the opportunity to think about 4-5 things that helped and some that didn't. And maybe we could discuss all these things between us.'*

Few participants said that it is difficult to implement this kind of practice especially if it requires the writing of a calendar: *'It is impossible to be able to keep a reflective calendar because it is time-consuming.'* *'In spite of being very helpful, keeping a calendar is impossible for a teacher.'* One respondent opposed the idea: *'If you are experienced, you are able to know what went wrong and you don't have to record anything.'*

Pre-primary education teachers appeared to be more positive regarding the engagement into reflective practices compared to primary education teachers.

**Content of training:** When discussing general aspects of the content of the in-service training programmes, most of the participants referred to the need for more practical training and for the need to be given examples on the conduct of teaching on specific subjects: *'Personally, I find it more useful to have training on practice. I don't like just to be seated and be given a pack of papers to read, I prefer to see these in practice.'* *'A combination of theory and practice.'* *'Give us some examples on how we can implement some ideas.'* Some participants also expressed their need to have the opportunity to exchange material with other teachers: *'The exchange of material would be very helpful.'* A few respondents requested training focused on teachers' needs and interests: *'More focus on subjects that interest teachers,'* and *'Focused on teachers' needs.'*

**Contribution of other governmental authorities:** When the participants were asked if they would like to get trained by governmental authorities other than the Ministry of Education, many responded positively: *'There should be some cooperation with other ministries as well.'* *'Maybe*

*the other ministries are more qualified than the Ministry of Education.*’ ‘...there are so many subjects that we teach children, I am sure there is something that could be done.’ Some respondents referred to specific subjects and departments that could contribute to the training of teachers: ‘*Something about gas oil, that we listen too much about, could be created, for road safety.*’ ‘*Yes, the Ministry of Agriculture could offer something.*’ ‘*The authorities concerned with the environment could provide something related to teaching.*’ A few participants pointed out that the implementation of this kind of training requires skilled educators: ‘*If there are skilled educators yes.*’ ‘*The trainer should be selected carefully.*’

The teachers of pre-primary education appeared to be more interested in participating in these special training programmes compared to the teachers of primary education.

In the third part of the focus groups, the participants were asked questions related to the **structure of the training programmes**:

**Size of audience:** The majority of the participants expressed their preference for smaller audiences: ‘*Small is better*’, ‘*We prefer small audiences,*’ ‘*25-30 persons.*’

Some participants said that the size of the audience depends on the type of the training or the place where it is held: ‘*It depends on the type of the training programme. In the case of theoretical training, a large audience is alright, but if it is a practical one, the audience should be small.*’ ‘*It depends on the physical location of the training.*’

One participant said that the audience should be neither too small nor too big: ‘*If it is too small sometimes it is difficult to listen to too many ideas, if there are many people in the training room, you may hide behind others. So, the size of the audience should make you talk or feel comfortable.*’

**Establishment of accreditation system:** When the participants were asked about their opinion regarding the establishment of the accreditation system for their participation in the in-service training programmes, almost everyone seemed to disagree with the idea. A few of the respondents said that the credits should be given according to the quality of the training programmes and their results: ‘*It depends on the quality of the training. We attend too many programmes, long hours with zero results. On the contrary, we have also attended training for two shorter periods and*

*they were very effective.’ ‘The credits should be given to those who had results and not only for attendance.’*

Some respondents pointed out the possibility that the acquisition of credits became the only concern of teachers: *‘There is the possibility though that credits may become the only reason for which teachers would participate in training programmes.’ ‘I think, eventually, teachers will care only for credits.’*

Several respondents suggested that the accreditation system is unnecessary as training is a personal matter and the only thing that is needed is to raise teachers’ interest in the training programmes: *‘It depends on you, how many programmes you will attend.’ ‘The right thing is to organize the seminars in such a way that teachers may be motivated to participate. They should be interesting and organized so that teachers would like to participate.’*

**Distance learning:** When asked about their opinion regarding distance learning opportunities, the majority of the participants responded that this is a very useful method and added the advantages of this practice: *‘That is very good’, ‘You could work during your free time’, ‘It helps when you are in a remote area’, ‘It helps when you need direct feedback.’*

The respondents that seemed to disagree with this idea were the elderly participants who were not quite familiar with the technological means in general. *‘Personally, I have a family and I don’t really like it’, ‘It is an impersonal way’, ‘I don’t actually prefer it, the computer makes me tired.’*

Apart from the subjects set for the purpose of the focus groups, some other topics emerged during the contact of the focus groups. These are the following:

Several participants, all of them teachers of primary education, stressed the importance of **school-based training**: *‘Personally, I think that the best training is school-based training.’ ‘A school is a living organization and one should be trained by another...’ ‘It is a pity the nice things that happen between two teachers should remain personal...we should have more time for talking in schools about these kinds of subjects.’*

Teachers also referred to the **dissemination of good practices** between the teachers of the same school and at a broader level: *‘There are so many worthy things that happen in school but unfortunately they remain in the classroom.’ ‘What we did this year on Mathematics for the purpose of the New Curricula could be passed from the teacher to the counsellor and then to*



*academics. It should be further utilized.* 'Unfortunately, the teacher is not being listened to. The teacher has so much to offer.' 'There are some colleagues who work excellently but unfortunately the things they do don't reach us and this results in the repetition of the same things.' 'What you do should be delivered to another ten colleagues.'

Some participants, especially those in administrative positions and with many years of service, referred to the **lack of time** for participating in in-service training. In accordance to this, there was a consensus among almost all the respondents on the conduct of in-service training programmes during working hours: 'We just don't have time,' 'I don't have enough time,' 'The issue of time is a problem,' 'We prefer during working hours,' 'It is very important for the training to take place during working hours.'

## **Conclusions**

In spite of their limitations, the focus groups conducted provide a valuable source of information on what teachers of primary and pre-primary education in Cyprus prefer regarding their in-service training. Although the groups were not representative of all Cypriot teachers, the opinions obtained provide a foundation for the development of training programmes adjusted to the needs of the teachers' population in Cyprus. As the proposals for innovative teachers' in-service training refer to the adaptation to teachers' needs and interests, the main evaluators of these proposals are the teachers themselves. Many participants expressed their appreciation of having the opportunity to voice their opinion about the training they receive. Some of them said that it was the first time someone had asked for their opinion about something that concerns them. Teachers are ready to speak about their preferences and needs for training and there is a willingness to co-operate for the improvement of in-service training. Some of the participants seemed to be eager to talk about the problems and difficulties they faced during the training programmes and some of them provided additional solutions and ideas for upgrading the programmes.

The findings of the focus groups provide insight into the limitations of the existing training programmes and, at the same time, propose innovative ideas and practices that could lead to the update and improvement of the programmes according to the teachers' preferences. The proposals were evaluated and examined by the participants in terms of their utility and applicability. Some of them were considered to be quite helpful for teachers, whereas some others were not perceived positively by the participants.

## **Recommendations**

1. Involve skilled teachers in the training of their colleagues. Teachers like the idea of being trained by another teacher who shares the same experiences with them. If the abilities of a teacher or his/her good practices are recognized, he/she could itinerate in nearby schools and provide guidance to other teachers. This will result in the dissemination of good practices among teachers.
2. Make limited use of the scheme '*one generation of teachers teaches another generation.*' Teachers do not seem to like the idea of being trained by other teachers who had been previously trained on a subject on a formal basis. This practice does not seem to be very helpful for teachers and should be applied only when a massive number of teachers need to be trained on a new subject.
3. Provide advisors to teachers who ask for assistance and guidance for the implementation of their teachings. The consultant could assist inexperienced teachers in conducting their lessons either by organizing co-teaching or by observing their teaching and providing feedback.
4. Use instructors that have classroom experience and speak from a position which allows them to understand how teachers think and feel. The trainers should not be detached from classroom practice for a long time. Teachers should also have the opportunity to contact academics who can inform them on the latest scientific trends.
5. Provide the opportunity to teachers to observe teachings of other teachers either in real time or tape-recorded. This practice is very helpful for teachers especially when a new subject or method is introduced.
6. Involve participatory training methods during which the learning derives mainly from the participants themselves rather than from the instructor. Apply experiential learning and constructivist methods which require the active role of the participants and place the teachers in the position of students. Teachers should be asked to implement action research and project methods based on their own problems and queries which will actually benefit them and provide solutions to their problems.
7. Provide the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their work and analyse their practices with the aid of other teachers. The exchange of views regarding the teaching of teachers appears to be a helpful practice. Teachers do not seem to like the idea of keeping a reflective calendar as this requires too much time and effort.

- 8.** Emphasize practical training more and theoretical training less. Teachers need actual and concrete ideas for implementing their teaching. Provide examples to teachers on the conduct of teachings on specific subjects and give teachers the opportunity to exchange materials necessary for their lessons.
- 9.** Involve governmental authorities other than the Ministry of Education and Culture in the in-service training of teachers. Departments of other ministries could offer training on specific domains which require expertise. This will supply teachers with additional knowledge and will upgrade their teaching of specific subjects.
- 10.** Training programmes in small groups are preferable to large groups. Participants learn and benefit more when they have the opportunity to interact with other participants and the instructor. The size of the audience is not an important factor when the subject of the training is theoretical, but when the training consists of practical training a small audience is required.
- 11.** Regarding the establishment of an accreditation system for participating in in-service training, teachers seem to oppose the idea and they underline the importance of introducing criteria for the measurement of the quality and not the quantity of the training programmes teachers attend. Instead of the accreditation system, teachers suggest the introduction of appropriate incentives that should be offered to teachers for participating in in-service training and the programmes should meet the interests of teachers to a greater extent.
- 12.** Reinforce school-based training. Teachers benefit more when they are trained in their working environment and when the training is adapted to their personal needs and problems. A well-organized school-based training also promotes collaboration among peers in the school and contributes to the construction of a productive environment.
- 13.** Introduce distance learning opportunities which could help teachers overcome the obstacles of distance or limited time related to their in-service training.
- 14.** Establish on-line learning communities where the participants will be able to have online discussions, participate in newsgroups, access online mentoring, provide feedback to inexperienced teachers, exchange materials and ideas in order to implement their teachings.
- 15.** Organize training programmes during working hours. Teachers have difficulties in attending training programmes after school and prefer the training programmes to take place during working hours.

## **References**

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