

The School: A Place of Challenge and Psychosocial Adaptation for Pupils

IOANNA GIANNOPOULOU*

Abstract

The latest results from the PISA survey (2015), which takes place every three years under the auspices of the OECD, indicated that Greece has one of the lowest ranking (32/35) in science performance of 15-year-olds among 35 OECD countries. Similar findings were found with regards to Greek pupils' performance in mathematics, reading comprehension and collaborative problem solving. At the same time, Greek pupils' life satisfaction is one of the lowest among OECD countries. The latest results from the pan-Hellenic research study conducted by the University Mental Health Research Institute (UMHRI), which takes place every four years under the auspices of the World Organization Health with regards to adolescents' health-related behaviours, revealed that one in three pupils (32%) report being highly stressed by school work pressure, with girls outnumbering boys (36.1% vs. 27.8%); the proportion of pupils drawing satisfaction from school attendance drops significantly with their age: from 83.9% (11 years) to 57.1% (13 years) and 48.9% (15 years). School is the place where children and adolescents spend a large proportion of their day outside their family homes. As a micro-model of society, plays a crucial role in promoting children's and adolescents' socio-emotional development, psychological resilience and psycho-social adaptation. Therefore, positive school environment, namely school that operates as a caring community can be an important protective factor for the mental health of children and adolescents, while a problematic school environment can lead to low motivation for learning, low self-esteem, the development of psychosomatic symptoms, aggressive behaviour and high-risk behaviours, such as alcohol and/or drug use/abuse. This

presentation will attempt to interpret the reduced socio-emotional and academic competences, that a growing proportion of Greek pupils present with, as a result of the constantly shifting social and geopolitical changes experienced by our young people, and in the light of the peculiar weaknesses of the Greek education system.

Key words: mental health, psychosocial adaptation, school community, high-risk behaviours, pupils, pupils

* Assistant Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2nd Department of Psychiatry, Attikon University General Hospital, Rimini 1, 124 62 Haidari, Athens, Greece
Telephone: 2105832426, 6973385271
e-mail: igioannag@gmail.com

Introduction

The latest results from the Program for International Pupil Assessment (PISA) survey (2015), which takes place every three years under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), indicated that Greece has one of the lowest ranking (32/35) in science performance of 15-year-olds among 35 OECD countries¹. Similar findings were found with regards to Greek pupils' performance in mathematics, reading comprehension and collaborative problem solving. At the same time, the average level of pupil's life satisfaction is one of the lowest among OECD countries participating in PISA (rank 38/47). Approximately 29% of boys and 17.5% of girls, aged 14-18 years, report poor school performance - either low school grades (10-13/20) or having repeated a grade.²

In the field of school psychology, positive mental health is defined not only as the absence of significant symptoms of mental disorder but also refers to socio-emotional skills that contribute to positive adaptation and resiliency, psychological well-being and a sense of self-efficacy.^{3,4} The role and contribution of the teacher (educator-pedagogue) in promoting pupils' psychosocial adjustment is manifold and crucially relevant. Factors associated with 'poor' mental health and well-being include school bullying, lack of acceptance by peers and lack of support from parents and teachers. Frequent or sustained stress leads to emotional and physiological strain, which in turn has an effect on the development of frequent psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, abdominal pain and backache. In contrast, positive school experience has been identified as a protective factor against the development of frequent health complaints.⁵

This presentation will attempt to interpret the reduced socio-emotional and academic competences, that a growing proportion of Greek pupils show, as a result of the constantly shifting social and geopolitical changes experienced by our young people, and in the light of the peculiar weaknesses of the Greek education system.

The mental health of adolescents in Greece nowadays

Adolescence is a transitional stage in human development, which is characterized by significant biological, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial changes that contribute to the progressive personal

identity formation (Who am I? What do I plan to do when I grow up? What are the most important values in life? Will I manage to make my dreams come true?) and developing a sense of "belonging" to a community. These changes, as well as the need for establishing independence and developing individuality that signal the progressive transition from childhood to adulthood, make adolescents psychologically vulnerable, especially in a world, where they experience the political and social reality as often being provocatively callous, complicated, contradictory and expressionless. The impact of ever-changing socio-economic (poverty, unemployment, adverse living conditions, collapse of values, intra-family and social violence, shrinking social services) and geopolitical (threats - terrorist attacks, wars, increased refugee flows, natural disasters) conditions on children's and adolescents' mental health, are already visible in our country, where there has been noted an increase in occurrence of emotional and behavioural disorders, but also of 'new' psychopathological manifestations and high-risk behaviours, mainly among adolescents.

Results from the last European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) indicate that Greece ranks first among European countries in the rate of 16-year-olds with gambling experience; one in seven pupils (14.6%) reported gambling for money at least once in the last 12 months, either online or in betting shops, and ten times higher rate was reported for boys (26.9%) than girls (2.6%).⁶ Close to three quarters of Greek pupils reported that alcohol use had occurred during the last 30 days, which was well above the ESPAD average (48 %), and a slightly higher proportion than the ESPAD average reported that heavy episodic drinking (≥ 5 drinks in a row) had taken place during the same period of time. In addition, a higher proportion of Greek pupils start to drink alcohol at a very young age (<13 years). Lifetime use of cannabis was reported by 9 % of the Greek pupils, compared to the overall average of 16 %, but unlike in most European countries where cannabis use has remained stable during the 2007-2016 period, in Greece it has grown marginally, though use of synthetic cannabinoids is increasing at an alarming rate. In addition, as compared with the European average, lifetime use of inhalants was more common among the Greek pupils (12.5% vs. 7.2%).⁶

It is important to note that 9.7% of boys and 20.6% of girls in Greece report suicide attempt, while the corresponding deaths amount to 3.8 / 100,000

among boys and 0.8 / 100000 among girls.²

Over the years, between 1998 and 2014, the proportion of adolescents living in a single-parent families (5.5% and 11.8%, respectively) or reconstituted families (1.1% and 2.3% respectively) has doubled. A small but not insignificant portion of the pupils are not satisfied with their family relationships nor with the quality of communication with their parents.⁷

School and mental health

School is the place where children and adolescents spend a large proportion of their day outside their family homes. As a micro-model of society, school it is not only a place of academic learning but primarily plays an important role in promoting children's and adolescents' socio-emotional development, psychological resilience and psycho-social adaptation, that will help subsequent integration into adult's working society, and therefore, by definition, is a social organization that should foster creative cooperation, solidarity, sociability rather than competition. In recent years, the Greek school, as a major social institution, has faced continuous devaluation and depreciation, while at the same time there has been an increase in the proportion of children and adolescents presenting with a wide range of difficulties that have a negative impact on their physical and mental health, learning and psychosocial school adjustment. Epidemiological studies from different countries converge at a prevalence of mental health problems in children and adolescents of about 10-20% with anxiety, conduct, attention, and depressive disorders being the most common, with the majority of these children not receiving any counseling or psychosocial support. In Greece, a corresponding proportion of pupils presents with psychosocial adjustment difficulties, which have a negative impact on their school adaptation and academic performance. Research into pre-school and school aged children in Greece indicates that 16% manifest psychosocial adjustment difficulties.⁸ School peer relationships, teacher-pupil relationships, and general classroom climate play a key role in pupils' behaviour. More specifically, relational factors, such as child-teacher^{9,10,11} child-peers^{12,13} and family-school community¹⁴ relationships affect the chances of the child/adolescent developing behavioural problems.

The latest results from the pan-Hellenic research study concerning health behaviours, based on a representative sample of 4,141 11-,13- and 15-year-old

pupils, which was conducted by the University Mental Health Research Institute (UMHRI)¹⁵, within the framework of the cross-national ESPAD survey that takes place every four years under the auspices of the World Organization Health, are of particular interest. Regarding pupils' experiences and perceptions of school, one in three pupils (32%) report highly stressed by school work pressure, with girls outnumbering boys (36.1% vs. 27.8%). Greece is among the countries where adolescents report the lowest rate of satisfaction from school, and especially for 15-year-old pupils, holds the penultimate position. Specifically, the proportion of pupils drawing satisfaction from school attendance drops significantly with their age: from 83.9% (11 years) to 57.1% (13 years) and 48.9% (15 years), which possibly reflects different perceptions of not only the way the school is organized and run at different levels of education, but also regarding its role, its value system and the hierarchy of educational goals. Lyceum (upper secondary school; grades 9-12) attracts the most negative publicity. Over time, from 1998 to 2014, the proportion of pupils who reported that they feel accepted by their classmates was significantly reduced (from 80.4% to 70.4%). However, in 2014 compared to 2010, significantly more adolescents reported that they feel accepted by their teachers (79.4% and 72.1% respectively), that teachers care about them (69.2% and 61.1% respectively), and that they trust their teachers (56.3% and 47.3%, respectively), although with increasing age, teenagers appear to be less satisfied with their relationships with teachers. At a rate of 7.5% adolescents reported bullying others, at least twice a month in the previous couple of months, and boys were twice as likely as girls to do so (10.7% versus 4.4%). There was a significant age difference in responses with higher percentage of the 13-year-olds (9.6%) and 15-year-olds (8.8%) reporting bullying others, as compared to 11-year-olds (4.0%). The most frequent reported forms of bullying included verbal teasing (7.8%), sexual gestures (6.6%), spreading false rumors (4.9%) and exclusion from joint ventures and activities; 6.4% reported being bullied at least twice a month in the last two months. Unlike in the case of bullies, where boys outnumbered girls, boys and girls reported at similar rates being a victim of bullying, and there were no significant differences between the three age groups. The use of physical violence, racial bullying, religious harassment, and cyber bullying were reported at rates below 2.0%. The researchers pointed out that in 2014, the percentage of teenagers who reported

having been bullied at school was lower than in any other year, possibly due to systematic interventions aiming to raise school community's and parents' awareness about bullying and its effects on pupils' mental health.

The features of the Greek education system

The Greek school increasingly faces multiple challenges in a wide range of areas, including those related to managing pupils' psychosocial problems, which are largely associated with the dramatic social and economic changes that took place during the economic crisis, the breakdown of community and social cohesion. The quality of the Greek education system, as an urgent demand and priority for change, has often become the epicenter of the public dialogue, and it is the requested and expected outcome of every intervention and reform effort.¹⁶ However, despite the correct highlights and intentions, the successive educational reforms did not allow for articulating and securing a clearly defined educational policy with vision and coherence between the different levels of education, and neither upgraded the role of the vocational education. In addition, the numerous educational reforms did not manage to change the tight timetable, so that to allow time for innovative actions that will promote not only learning but also psychosocial competence. Since 1974, many educational reforms in Greece, and particularly in the secondary education level, relate basically to introducing changes in the exam-based admission system to tertiary education level and did not manage to change the inflexible, overcrowded and overly exam focused curriculum. The grades and the exams continue to constitute the driving force of academic performance and the entire system of education, something which is cultivated by all factors of school life (e.g. curricula, teachers, parents, private tuition).¹⁶ Pupils' free time is dominated by after-school assistance and tutorials from the first years of primary school, resulting in children not having enough time for play and socializing. The majority of Greek pupils in upper secondary school (Lykeio) are enrolled in two parallel systems of education: morning and afternoon, so they are educated throughout the day. There is the paradox of after school expensive private tuition (e.g. one-to-one tuition at home, study centers, afternoon classes so called *frontistiria*) preparing good and excellent pupils for passing the famously difficult pan-Hellenic exams required to get to highly ranking (top)

University Schools (e.g. Medicine, Law, Electrical & Computer Engineering). The statutory introduction of remedial teaching into the Greek public schools has not had the expected results in combating *para-paideia* (parallel private tuition), which continues to be the necessary 'evil' across all levels of education.

The cognitive psychologist and pedagogue Piaget said "*learning means discovering*" and "*we do not learn to swim while seeing others to swim*". In the majority of schools in European countries, the teacher has his own classroom, which is appropriately configured learning space meeting the demands of the taught subject, ensuring this way active and experiential learning. On the contrary, in the Greek public school the pupil usually is an observer (passive learner), as he is not provided with an opportunity to 'discover' knowledge through specifically designed technology-mediated, project-based activities (active learner). One of the reasons as to why this is happening lies in the shortcomings of material and technical infrastructure in schools (e.g. functional deficiencies of the school buildings, degradation of aesthetic aspects of the school environment, lack of or not utilizing teaching labs for science teaching). So, even if the material being taught is well-organized, the traditional didactic approaches do not lead to permanent and meaningful learning neither stimulate the development of a critical thinking. While in Europe a great emphasis is placed on teaching art and culture, in Greece remains the traditional distinction between primary (e.g. math, science, language) and secondary (e.g. music, physical education, information-technology) subjects, which in conjunction with the exam-oriented curriculum and admission system to tertiary education level, do not allow enough space for innovative and creative activities, particularly in secondary education level. In most European countries, children who are in primary schools are not given much or any homework so when they get home from school they have plenty of time for play, leisure and recreation activities that are vital ingredients of a healthy and happy childhood. In contrast, Greek children study endlessly and experience their life as hard-working; the homework is often a cause of stress, frustration and family disruption. As the Russian teacher Usinski said, "Oblige the child to walk, she/he will get tired quickly, to jump the same, to sit alone the same, but if he/she changes all these activities all day, he/she will not get tired. Long-lasting and repetitive activity in the same direction has a detrimental effect for every child".

Considering all the above allows us to

point out that the promotion of mental health is not one of the immediate priorities of the Greek school, whereby the psychosocial concerns are usually confined to developmental problems that are visible as direct obstacles to learning and are specified in the legislation for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. At the secondary, written exams are replaced with oral in the case of pupils with dyslexia or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), whereas in primary school pupils may be offered if needed parallel support in the classroom in the case of ADHD or ASD or integration class.

The school as a caring community

The role and contribution of the teacher in promotion of child's / adolescent's psychosocial adaptation is crucial. Nowadays, schools increasingly recognize the importance of social and emotional learning (defined as capacity to recognize and manage negative emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others) in promoting healthy pupil development and academic achievement. In recent years, in the international literature, a great emphasis has been placed on the role of positive school environment on children's mental health. Positive school environment provides balanced development of cognitive, emotional and social skills, as well as the creation of an appropriate environment that facilitates learning and promotes the psychosocial adaptation of all members of the school community. Classrooms and the school in general, can become frameworks that promote the positive adaptation of their members and function as communities where everyone cooperates, looks after and cares for each other (caring for pupils and caring by pupils).¹⁷

School, as a caring community, can be an important protective factor for the mental health of children and adolescents, while a problematic school environment can lead to low motivation for learning, low self-esteem, the development of psychosomatic symptoms, aggressive behaviour and high-risk behaviours, such as alcohol and/or drug use/abuse. A school that cares for children has a different perception not only of how it is organized and functions, but also of its role, the value system and the hierarchy of its educational goals, having as its main target and duty the multifaceted development of children and not just their academic progress. Consequently, it places emphasis not only on the content of educa-

tion (curriculum), but also on the human relations and the emotional atmosphere in which the learning process and the socialization of children unfold. The school as a caring community supports children in a variety of ways and in different circumstances, and takes care of all members of the school community. Its members care and support each other, identify with the group, and share common goals and visions. Pupils who develop a 'sense of community' and a feeling of 'school connectedness' are more likely to develop: (a) positive social behaviour (interest in others, acceptance of diversity), (b) positive attitude towards school, (c) motivation to learn and acquire skills, (d) sense of autonomy and personal control, (e) social skills and social competence, (f) positive self-efficacy beliefs. Such a school responds to the basic psychological needs of children (a sense of self-efficacy, supporting autonomy, and connection with others - feeling of belonging).¹⁷

Programs to prevent and promote mental health in schools

Mental health promotion includes every practice integrated into school policy that helps to develop optimal mental health and at the same time prevents the development of mental health problems, by enhancing the factors that promote pupils' psychosocial adaptation and reducing risk factors that hinder the psychosocial adjustment and learning. Health promotion school programs in Greece, usually, obey the logic of fragmenting the problems of the school community and facing each problem separately. Specific programs aiming at prevention of drug use and abuse, school violence, emerging mental health related disorders are the usual topics of currently implemented health promotion programs in schools¹⁸. What has been observed in the operation of the above mentioned actions is the fragmentation and lack of their interconnection. Even though these health programs constitute a worthwhile effort, they lack evaluation of their long-term effectiveness. In addition, they usually do not aim at systemic changes of the school community's dynamics, since they are not directed to all members of the school community. Therefore, an important objective of interventions in schools should be to rebuild the school community.^{18,19}

Family-school collaboration involves not only pupil's academic performance, but also managing behavioral problems and fostering parental involve-

ment in school life, which results in strengthening the parent-pupil-teacher relationships and in successful handling of incidents of aggression.²⁰ The active involvement of parents in school education contributes to pupils' academic performance, while at the same time fosters pupils' psychosocial development, prevents and manages challenging behaviours and adaptation difficulties. Cooperation and communication between teachers and parents is a prerequisite for pupils' healthy development and psychosocial school adaptation.²¹

Epilogue

The systemic approach in managing pupils' psychosocial adjustment difficulties by schools, families and communities, where everyone works together towards a common goal, is essential to achieve pupils' academic potential and psychological well-being.²¹ The creation of an effective system that cares and looks after young people is much concerned with the position held by the State and of all individual members of the system (schools, families, communities, services) that should be co-working and effectively communicating with the common aim to strengthen mental well-being of children and adolescents and foster their psychological resilience.²² The key question is how we can change the philosophy of our education system, so that at its heart, personal development and meeting pupils' needs, matters that are currently undermined, will be fostered. The belief that the presence of a school psychologist or counselor itself will effectively help in dealing with pupils' psychosocial adaptation difficulties is rather misleading, as his/her intervention alone is not sufficient to ensure the holistic approach and systemic changes required in the field of education.

References

1. PISA Results in Focus. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>
2. Kokkevi A., Kitsos G., Fotiou A. *Adolescence: Behaviours and Psychosocial Health*. Publishers Beta Med Arts, Athens, 2008. (in Greek)
3. Chatzechrestou C.G. (Ed.). *Social and Emotional Education in school: Programme for the promotion of mental health and learning in the school community. Training Materials I, II, III*. Publishers Tipothito, Athens, 2011. (in Greek)
4. Masten A.S. Promoting Competence and Resilience in the School Context. *Professional School Counseling* 2008; 12(2): 76-845.
5. WHO/Europe. Fact sheet: Adolescents' Mental Well-Being. www.euro.who.int/.../HBSC-No.7_factsheet_Well-being.
6. The University Mental Health Research Institute (UMHRI). Pan-European research study in schools on use of alcohol and other addictive drugs (ESPAD research): *Greece in comparison with European average in 2015*. www.espad.org. (in Greek)
7. Kokkevi A., Staurou M., Kanavou E., Fotiou A. Thematic journals series: Adolescents, Behaviors & Health. *Adolescents and their families*. The University Mental Health Research Institute. Athens 2015.
8. Chatzechrestou C.G., Polichroni F., Bezevegis I, Milonas K. Exploring the evolutionary characteristics of preschool and school aged children's' psychosocial adjustment based on standardized Psychosocial Adjustment Test. *Psychology* 2011, 18(4): 503-524. (in Greek)
9. Buyse E., Verschueren K., Doumen S., Van Damme J., Maes F. Classroom problem behavior and teacher-child relationships in kindergarten: the moderating role of classroom climate. *J Sch Psychol.* 2008; 46(4): 367-91, doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2007.06.009.
10. Doumen S., Verschueren K., Buyse E., Germeijs V., Luyckx K., Soenens B. Reciprocal relations between teacher-child conflict and aggressive behavior in kindergarten: a three-wave longitudinal study. *J Clin Child Adolesc Psychol.* 2008; 37(3):588-99. doi: 10.1080/15374410802148079.
11. McCormick M.P., Turbeville A.R, Barnes S.P., McClowry S.G. Challenging Temperament, Teacher-Child Relationships, and Behavior Problems in Urban Low-Income Children: A Longitudinal Examination. *Early Education and Development* 2014, 25(8): 1198-1218. doi: 10.1080/10409289.2014.915676.
12. Keane S.P., Calkins S.D. Predicting kindergarten peer social status from toddler and preschool problem behavior. *J Abnorm Child Psychol.* 2004; 32(4):409-23.
13. Yoleri S. The Effects Behavior Problems in Preschool Children Have on Their School Adjustment. *Education* 2013; 134(2): 218-226.
14. Papatheodorou Th. *Behaviour Problems in the Early Years: A Guide for Understanding and Support*. Routledge Falmer, 2005
15. Kokkevi A., Staurou M., Kanavou E., Fotiou A. Thematic journals series: Adolescents, Behaviors & Health. *Adolescents in school environment*. The University Mental Health Research Institute. Athens 2015. (in Greek)
16. Vlachos D., Daglis I., Giagatzoglou S., Vavouraki A. Ποιότητα και εκπαίδευση: Σύνοψη της μελέτης, συμπεράσματα και προτάσεις. *Quality in Education: Research on the evaluation of quality characteristics of primary and secondary school system*. Athens, Αθήνα, Pedagogical Institute 2008. (in Greek)
17. Baker, J.A., Terry, T., Bridger, R., & Winsor, A. Schools as caring communities: A relational approach to school reform. *School Psychology Review* 1997, 26(4): 586-602.
18. Charitou-Fatourou M., Chalimourda S., Kapetanou E. Collaborative learning: general information, 2012, synergatiki-mathisi.bogspot.com/p/blog-page_11.html. (in Greek)
19. Zafirides F. Prevention of psychotropic drug use as a social and political responsibility. Proceedings of the one-day conference on "The reduction of illicit drug demand and the role of local government: The example of Prevention Centres", Thessaloniki, 2011. (in Greek)
20. Chinas P., Chrisafidis K. Aggression in schools - Suggestions for prevention and management, Ministry of Education, 2000, <https://paroutsas.jmc.gr/agressiv.htm> (in Greek)
21. Milonakou-Keke I. Collaboration between school, family and community. Theoretical approaches and applications in practice. Athens: Self-published, 2009 (Central distribution: Publishing Co. Papazisi). (in Greek)
22. Esquivel GB., Doll B., Oades Sese GV. Introduction to the special issue: Resilience in schools. *Psychology in the Schools* 2011; 48(7): 649-651. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20585>.

