

“Professional High School (EPA.L.) As A Means Of Configuration And Exercise Of Internal Educational Policy”

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Abstract

This research is innovative in the field of organization and administration of education in Greece because the issue has not been scientifically researched in EPA.L. Purpose of the research is to determine the views and perceptions of teachers' while they exercise the educational policy of EPA.L. and to record their proposals and suggestions. The research was conducted with the use of semi-structured interview. Key findings of the research are that EPA.L. is necessary in the current difficult time, it need to stand on its own feet, it must find ways of saving resources and it should be supported by the local community.

Keywords: Internal educational policy, Effective principal, Cooperative teachers association, Decentralization works, Project Planning, Internal self-assessment.

1. Literature Review

Brinia (2010, 2014) reports that recent data in the Greek educational system highlight the serious problem of lack of managers with leadership skills and knowledge related to the organization and administration of educational units, based on the current needs worldwide. Research carried out in London (Rutter, 1979) concludes that the students' performance depends more on the character of effective schools rather than the background of the students' family. Similar research was presented in the US (Beare, 1989) which concludes that: "Teachers are increasingly convinced that the characteristics of the school are significant factors leading students in academic achievements and success". According to Andreou (1998), the formation of an "internal" policy in EPA.L. aims to encourage initiatives such as: promoting educational innovation, continuous support and strengthening of educational work, the use of existing structures, searching for new teaching practices and usage of teaching materials. It is necessary to make significant changes to EPA.L., but these cannot be achieved if they are not understood at EPA.L.'s level. as they result in the improvement of working conditions and learning.

Eight core components-axes are necessary in an EPA.L. (Image 1) in order to have an improvement while it shapes and exercises operational 'internal' education policy (Brinia, 2008).

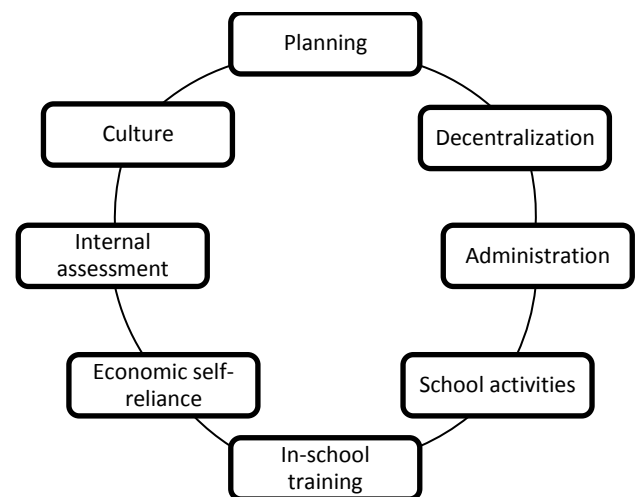


Image 1: Axes to improve internal educational policies in EPA.L.

1. Management, organization, planning and assessment

It is necessary to organize and manage the EPA.L. with careful programming - planning, decision making and reporting. Planning should be accepted by all the teachers in order to achieve the objectives which are set in the planning phase. Results are achieved through proper guidance and motivation of human resources (Brinia, 2008, Saitis, 2005).

2. Decentralization

The collective bodies (Association of teachers and parents) should exercise their powers without prior approval of the central administrative authorities, whilst being adapted to the intimate reality of EPA.L. The school's freedom is promoted, initiatives are encouraged and the bureaucracy is limited, while the professional responsibility of

teachers and the confidence of learners are growing.

3. Administration bodies

To shape and exercised effective "internal" policy to EPA.L., it is essential that all governing bodies must work cooperatively and responsibly. These are:

- a. The principal: The characteristics of the effective principal are open-mindedness, understanding and how he/she deals with planned and unplanned situations that arise during the school year.
- b. Teachers' Association. The decisions of the collective school management body are more impartial and objective than the principal's, but it needs more time.
- c. The Association of Parents. In partnership with associations of teachers it has positive effects on the overall educational project.

4. School activities

EPA.L. can develop activities that contribute to the development of "internal" education policy and their effective operation. These activities may include:

- a. All kinds of cultural and school events.
- b. Participation in innovative activities (health education, environmental education, etc.), in study visits and exchange programs with schools in other areas or other countries.
- c. The conservation, improvement and rational use of school facilities.
- d. The school health and hygiene issues.
- e. The equipment of EPA.L. with teaching tools, books, etc.

5. The in-school training of teachers

The in-school training program starts with an assessment of teachers' needs and then responsible for carrying out this seminar is a specialist who can also be a teacher from the school .

6. Economic self-reliance

The economic self-reliance would result in the timely resolution of logistical problems and better satisfaction of the real needs.

7. 'Internal' self-assessment

The "internal" self- assessment includes the simultaneous evaluation of all the factors which shape the educational results. In particular it includes the infrastructure, programs, books, school organization and the training needs of teachers.

8. Change the culture

Elements of the culture in EPA.L. should be interpersonal relationships, attitudes, values and students' evaluation system. To develop a collaborative culture, the prerequisite is the

creation of an "internal" environment that respects freedom and individuality of all stakeholders .

2. Research

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 16 teachers in 9 EPA.L. of Northern Aegean Sea in Greece. The selection was based on criteria of diversity as to the characteristics of gender, years of experience, specialty and positions in the administrative hierarchy of EPA.L.

2.2. Methodology

At the beginning of the research three trial interviews were conducted as pre-research of the research process (pilot survey). The objective of the pilot survey was to determine the validity and reliability of the content of the questions and the degree of understanding of the chosen vocabulary. Questions and answers of the interviews were recorded. Guided by the results of the pilot survey, there were additions, deletions and amendments to certain questions.

The process of the interviews lasted forty days. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, in order to ensure the validity of the recording of the collected data. For each interview, the participants were previously contacted in order to explore their interest in participating in the research. Afterwards, a letter was sent to them to establish good communication and cooperation. This letter informed them about the purpose of the research and how the conclusions were going to be used. The interview plan was given to them in order to be fully prepared and they were assured for the anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. Since the beginning of the research we tried to be consistent in our meeting and in a preliminary acquaintance discussion we tried to remove any doubt from the participants, creating a warm climate and a friendly and comfortable atmosphere. During the interview (lasted about half an hour each) we encouraged the interviewees to express their view completely.

For the validity and reliability of the results, the researchers used triangulation to collect data. The more methods are used for detection of the survey data, the greater the possibility that these data are valid and reliable (Cohen & Manion, 1997). The selected methods were as follows:

- A. Semi-structured interview. The interview as a research tool is considered to provide higher quality information with a lower degree of statistical bias in comparison to other methods available to social scientists.
- B. Interview of Head of the Training Office of Lesvos: Checking whether his views converge with the views of teachers of EPA.L.
- C. Comparison of theoretical data with the three EPA.L. of Northern Aegean.

The questions of the semi-structured interviews matched to the axes of the theoretical framework. Typical questions were:

- What are the objectives in an EPA.L. for internal training?
- Is EPA.L. planning to address didactic, pedagogical, educational and broader local issues?

If so in which areas? If not, what do you suggest to do?

- Which school activities and innovative actions can be developed?
- What should be evaluated? Who and how will evaluate it? etc.

2.3. Research questions

The difficulties to access the area of Northern Aegean Sea in Greece and the absence of relevant bibliography and research data reinforced our desire to respond to the challenge to seek answers to the following key research questions:

- A. In EPA.L. in Northern Aegean is there room for growth in "internal" education policy? If so, in what forms of action?
- B. Do the specific characteristics of EPA.L. of Northern Aegean (logistics, management, staff training, etc) influence their effective functioning?

2.4. Restrictions and difficulties of research

Personal communication with teachers during the interview ensures clear advantages, but it also creates problems and difficulties. In particular, the problems encountered were:

1. The remote area and the weather (winter, lack of transportation linking the islands), created direct communication problems with some colleagues.
2. In the first four interviews (including those in the pilot) important facts were often omitted by the interviewee, he/she downgraded the importance of certain events or maximized some answers. These were overcome with the experience gained from these and the other interviews.

3. Results

Taking into account the priorities and the interview questions, we formed the following themes for presentation and analysis of the collected data:

1. Management, organization, planning, account and decentralization in EPA.L.
2. Role of the collective bodies of EPA.L.
3. Internal educational policies within EPA.L. (School activities - innovation, service training, internal self-assessment, economic self-reliance).
4. Climate and culture of cooperation in EPA.L.
5. School Effectiveness

For the organization and administration, teachers of our research argue that it is necessary for the administration to know the needs of EPA.L., focus on forward planning, organization and coordination of the human resources. Additionally laboratories, section leaders and old experienced teachers must be used to improve the effectiveness. Teachers of EPA.L. believe that at the beginning of the school year there should be an organized collective work regarding the planning and it will program and manage the administrative operation of the school. Regarding decentralization the teachers believe that it can be made by assigning extra-curricular activities and from teachers with experience. Teachers believe that the director of EPA.L. must be a moderator and an initiator of the

association of teachers. the director "sees" the best in the teachers, illustrates and assigns tasks, monitors the implementation of their work, and implements the decisions of the teachers' association. It is necessary to exploit the teaching staff and to take difficult decisions. The teachers' association establishes the framework of "internal" educational policy of EPA.L. in collaboration with the director, the decisions give solutions to key problems in the school.

Teachers of EPA.L. talked about interventions that are necessary in these schools. Briefly:

- a) Meetings of teachers per class to improve teaching.
- b) Transmission of new knowledge by training teachers.
- c) Compulsory participation in school networks as an incentive for learning, where there will be the opportunity to exchange views, ideas, technical skills.
- d) Evaluation can be done by teachers themselves by submitting their work (e.g. lesson plan,) to a database of a meritocratic organization who will evaluate it. It is also necessary to evaluate the infrastructure of EPA.L., the content of the educational function and the dropout of students.

4. Discussion

The review and discussion of the results is done on the basis of both the objectives of the research and the theoretical part. The findings confirm that EPA.L. of Northern Aegean Sea in Greece formulate and carry up to a point their own 'internal' education policy. Also a comparison of findings of the theoretical part of this work with the final objectives is done in order to illustrate the essential parameters of this research.

As for the organization and administration and planning, teachers of EPA.L. argue that it is necessary for those who administrate to know the needs of EPA.L., plan forward, organize and coordinate its human resources. Also, it is important to use responsible laboratories, section leaders and old experienced teachers, in a collaborative management style. Teachers talk about "selective scheduling", which is not essential but casual. They note that there is no planning for broader educational issues, while planning should focus on the launching of a modern educational-instructional practice, according to the needs of the daily life in the school.

Additionally it is found that there is no substantial review of educational and teaching results. The report is occasionally performed without any statistical processing and is conducted only to address what is dictated every year by the Ministry of Education. As for decentralization, the teachers emphasize that there is no specific "internal" policy on the distribution of teaching so each teacher acts according to his/her own philosophy. They point out that in EPA.L. there is no diffusion of power in Teachers' Association and teacher are not fully exploited by the Director .

There are views that see the Director as leader of EPA.L., even as a conductor who directs the orchestra, but there are few who believe he is tool for all jobs. The lack of administrative support for the Director in the current school requires him to seek support in teachers. Many teachers believe that the Teachers' Association focuses on formal issues and not on substantive things, highlighting its own

'internal' education policy. Furthermore, innovative initiatives are marginalized, as the Teachers' Association rarely meets for them and is activated only when a problem occurs.

Many teachers of EPA.L responded that they use local sources of learning. Additionally, the usefulness of study tours and excursions as the most important way of exploiting local sources of learning is highlighted. Several teachers of EPA.L. stated that they are encouraged by their Director to introduce new educational and teaching innovations. The Teachers' Association may assess the school unit and the majority of teachers recognize that evaluation offers a means for the structuring of the school demands, for improvement and development. According to our research, teachers' relative autonomy is detected more to the older teachers who know the legislative framework and use their rights during the educational practice and the implementation of innovative programs. For younger ones, the lack of experience hinders the pursuit of autonomy.

5. Conclusions

Based on the data and the analysis of the results we can make a final assessment of the findings relating to EPA.L. of Northern Aegean Sea in Greece. These findings highlight the significant aspects of the research and compare the results with the final objective, which is the improvement of the effectiveness of the EPA.L. These conclusions will help the EPA.L. to shape and pursue a more effective and operational 'internal' education policy. More specifically:

1. Climate and culture of cooperation in EPA.L.
 2. School Effectiveness
1. Management, organization, planning, account and decentralization in EPA.L.
 - a. Teachers believe that administrative decisions must be taken by the director and the teachers' board in collaboration.
 - b. The teachers see weaknesses in the cooperation with other bodies involved with the school (parents, committees, municipality, etc.). This weak cooperation brings into the light the miscommunication of schools with representatives of the above bodies.
 - c. It is obvious that the Director is not able to exercise command only by himself. The Director's role is limited to a simple executor - trustee of orders, instructions and decisions of the central government.
 - d. The programming/planning is general and not focused on how, when and why, for each issue separately. The issues that are depleted in depth and in detail are those that affect teachers personally. Pedagogical meetings are not planned in educational units, but are held when emergency issues from the part of students arise.
 - e. The report is almost unknown to EPA.L. There is some form of formal debriefing at the end of the school year, but in matters of secondary importance.
 2. Role of the collective bodies of EPA.L.
 - a. Decisions are taken by the majority, upon recommendation by the Director. The topics of the meetings of teachers Associations in EPA.L. focus on preparing school events, classes and the division of responsibilities rather than discussing and planning innovative actions. The problem lies in the type of decisions and the way they are taken. Only decisions concerning the daily operation of EPA.L. are taken and, therefore, teachers are not stimulated to participate effectively and not formally in meetings.
 - b. Many teachers are unaware of the planned legislation regarding the organization and administration of the school. Due to lack of training on issues of management, they do not make use of the powers granted to them.
 - c. Cooperation between teachers and parents of the students is mainly limited to performance issues, behavior and absenteeism among students. Additionally, the cooperation of teachers with the municipality and other local stakeholders seems to be problematic. However, in EPA.L. in semi-rural areas there is greater cooperation with these bodies in comparison with schools in urban areas.
 - d. The role of the Director is conceived in different ways. The Director can be the main initiator of all subjects in the regular and emergency meetings, he/she can try to solve alone some issues that rated as secondary or he can ask for help from a group of teachers whom he trusts. They believe that the director of EPA.L. must combine managerial, executive and consultative characteristics. The lack of administrative support of the Director in today EPA.L. obliges him to seek the support of teachers.
 3. Internal educational policies within EPA.L.
 - a. The use of the relative autonomy of teachers is mainly achieved in teaching and educational work. They can choose how to teach, but possibly not what to teach as it is defined by the official curriculum by the Ministry of Education. The relative autonomy is realized additionally with the work assigned to students, the organization of the curriculum, educational visits, theatrical performances, libraries, publication of a newspaper by the students etc.
 - b. The participation of teachers in innovative projects is moderate. The most important reason given is the lack of time. On the other hand, the most important incentive to participate in them is the expansion of their knowledge, the use of already existing knowledge and the overall openness of the school in the wider society. Especially in laboratories specialties where there is the possibility to link theory with practice, the teacher carries all degrees of freedom to transfer technical skills to the students. Through the implementation of programs, school activities and innovative activities generally, EPA.L. helps students to gain comprehensive understanding of work, production and the local community. With the implementation of innovative programs (like educational visits to companies/workplaces and construction of

technical projects), the teacher is able to express himself/herself autonomously and guide students on important educational issues.

- c. The innovative actions are planned, designed and implemented in a time outside of the regular program and this is one of the obstacles mentioned by the teachers. Students who participate are usually excited, energetic and active, while they unfold their imagination and skills.
 - d. The training of teachers in innovative activities is an important issue for encouraging and formatting a supportive base that will make them feel adequate and confident in the effectiveness of their actions. The teachers in our study expressed their desire to receive training especially in matters relating to their teaching. The in-school training, in their opinion, should focus on understanding the new educational measures, as well as the renewal of scientific and teaching knowledge, skills and attitudes.
 - e. They feel the need for training in matters related to school administration, but the possibility is not given to them. The organization of EPA.L. ranks first among the cognitive training objects. Below are the school management techniques. As a third it is recorded the educational need for general pedagogical issues. Training on the use of new technologies is recorded as the main need of managers..
 - f. A very important criterion for evaluating EPA.L is the personal satisfaction of students and their parents. With regards to the factors which need to be taken into account in any assessment of EPA.L., the staffing of these schools by the beginning of the year is considered the most important. The social environment from which the students come has to be taken seriously into account in any evaluation. The "internal" evaluation, i.e. the evaluation of EPA.L. from teachers themselves, is the only assessment that teachers of our research accept, believing that it is the only way to record the real problems of EPA.L. and their peculiarities.
 - g. The school environment in the border islands of Northern Aegean is degraded. The courses are often in inappropriate school buildings and infrastructure is lacking. Also there is a difference in quality of educational services offered to the student population of the border islands of Northern Aegean and especially in EPA.L.
 - h. The lack of suitable premises equipped with modern technology, in which teachers could develop activities is a significant negative factor in EPA.L. The private support schools and foreign languages limit the students' time and they are unable to deal with innovative actions carried out outside the curriculum and the school hours.
4. Climate and culture of cooperation in EPA.L.
 - a. The culture and climate are two concepts important and interrelated, in the formulation and conduct of "internal" educational policy of EPA.L. The school climate is influenced by the attitude and culture of its stakeholders (director, teachers, students,

parents). The good climate in EPA.L. and the culture of cooperation and teamwork that develop in these lead to positive results.

- b. To configure the good climate in an EPA.L., the responsibility of all its members is shared, but the important role is guiding and coordinating of initiatives by the director.
5. School Effectiveness
 - a. Effective EPA.L. must satisfy numerous criteria. The first occupies the cooperation of director and the teachers on board. Also the collaboration of director to each of the teachers individually, with parents and with local government are recorded as important determinants of good and effective school climate.
 - b. The implementation of innovations in EPA.L., good performance and stability of the teaching staff are important characteristics of the school effectiveness.
 - c. The degree of financing is still a factor in school efficiency, as well as the building problems, infrastructures and laboratories.
 - d. From the knowledge and skills that managers of EPA.L. should have as factors of school effectiveness, the first are the leadership and management skills that can be acquired through training programs, whose monitoring is an important feature of effective administration .
 - e. A good knowledge of educational law, good theory knowledge and management techniques and finally the previous management experience on behalf of the director, are considered important features of effective administration.
 - f. The director of EPA.L. should to combine the above knowledge-skills, with many individual features such as responsibility, sense of justice, cooperative behavior, good mood and flexibility in decision making.

6. EPILOGUE

From the study of relevant bibliography and the data analysis of the survey we conducted, it is shown that in a modern EPA.L. cooperation in all its forms is the dominant criterion of school effectiveness. The main keywords are two: A manager/director who is capable of planning and administrating and a cooperative teachers' association. It is important for the EPA.L. of Northern Aegean Sea in Greece to be supported in the current difficult time, to rely on their own knowledge and strengths, strive through the knowledge of the legislation and communicate and collaborate with the local community. We believe that EPA.L. is able to formulate and pursue its own 'internal' education policy taking into account the conclusions and recommendations of this research.

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