Research Article

Educational counselors' and psychologists' roles in interactions with parents in a diverse, polarized and changing society: Early childhood education interns' perceptions

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The aim of the study was to examine early childhood education (ECE) interns' perceptions toward the roles of educational counselors and psychologists in interactions with parents. Special attention was paid to investigating gender aspect. The participants included 24 female ECE interns who studied in a college in Israel, and who described events with parents in writing. The research is qualitative and includes descriptive statistics. Analysis of the findings indicated that ECE interns perceived educational counselors and psychologists in their traditional function as experts in the field of mental health, and to a lesser degree in systemic and social aspects. Contrary to the proactive approach promoted by the Ministry of Education, they afforded solutions in response to crises (secondary prevention level), and not at the primary prevention level. In terms of gender, most of the interns' (who were all women) communication was with mothers. It is crucial that kindergarten and school teachers use counselors and psychologists for leading proactive preventive programs. It is also important that educational teams become familiar with the role of counselors as agents of social change. Finally, they should strengthen the educational collaboration with fathers.

1. Introduction

Work with parents has always been a major core skill in the teaching profession, and comprises part of a broad ecological relationship system that includes the child, the parent, the educational team and the community. The 21st century is characterized by far-reaching changes that are reshaping social reality. Teachers and preschool teachers in general, and early childhood education (ECE) interns in particular, view work with parents as one of the complex and challenging tasks of their job (Friedman, 2011). Educational counselors and psychologists comprise a major connecting link between the educational team and the children's parents, and assist educators in cultivating high-quality and meaningful interrelations with parents at the individual as well as at the systemic level (Erhard, 2014). The present study aimed to examine how ECE interns perceive educational counselors' and psychologists' role in work with parents. Special attention was paid to testing gender aspects.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Parent-teacher Relations in a Culturally Diverse, Polarized and Changing Society

Significant changes in the social reality have taken place in recent decades in the Western world, including Israel. These changes are affecting parent-teacher relations in various ways, as described below:

2.1.1. Immigration, cultural heterogeneity and social polarization

In many Western countries, including Israel, there are various population groups living side by side, differing from one another in terms of religion, nationality, ethnicity, political inclination, and culture (Yogev, 2011). All social groups recognize the importance of the relationships between the educational institution and the parents. However, differences exist between patterns of parental involvement among different ethnic and class groups (Cousins & Mickelson, 2011; Robinson & Harris, 2014). For example, lack of economic resources, language and communication difficulties, feelings of alienation and mistrust, sometimes make it difficult for parents from ethnic minorities and a low socio-economic class to be present and involved at school (Hill, 2011).

Many policy makers and researchers therefore stress the need for cultivating cultural competence in institutions' work with diverse social and cultural groups. *Cultural competence* is characterized by acceptance and respect of otherness, awareness of the dynamics of cultural differences and power relations, and performance of diverse accommodations for clients from diverse cultural groups (Cross et al., 1989).

2.1.2. Development of new family structures

The breakdown of the traditional family cell, the social struggles of women and gender and sexual minorities for equal rights, and advanced fertility technologies have led to the evolution of alternative family structures, such as single-parent families, single parent out of choice, LGBT families, and more. Negative feelings and prejudices can influence the interaction of the educational team with alternative families (Godkar, 2009a, 2009b).
(Peleg, 2020) stressed the need to delay judgment when the educational team meets "new families". They must invest time and resources for understanding the structure, characteristics and arrangement of the new family, for clarification of its needs and for coordinating expectations. These families need a sympathetic and supportive attitude and feelings of being protected and secure, in order to increase their involvement in the school and the community (Peleg & Hartman, 2019).

2.1.3. Breakdown of the patriarchal masculinity model and consolidation of "new fatherhood" models

A public, academic and educational discourse on "new fatherhood", compared to traditional patriarchal fatherhood, has been taking place in the Western world and in Israel since the 1970s. The psychologist Ronald Levant (1992) criticized patriarchal fatherhood that reflects the model of the "desired fatherhood", where the father is perceived as the provider for the family, as responsible for managing discipline in the home and supporting his spouse, who is responsible for raising and educating their shared children. In contradistinction, "new fatherhood" emphasizes increased paternal involvement in the lives of the children, including care, education, creation of a parental environment based on values and personal example (Oren et al., 2010).

In spite of the change in the discourse on fatherhood, this is not necessarily reflected in the everyday reality in preschools and schools. For example, Deverakonda (2013) found that mothers have more opportunities for receiving information about their children, whereas fathers reported being often ignored by preschool teachers.

2.1.4. Integration and inclusion of special needs children into mainstream education

Since the 1990s, advanced legislation and educational reforms in the Western world and in Israel have led a revolution in the educational perception and in ways of working with children with special needs. These reforms emphasize society's responsibility for children with special needs, views otherness as an advantage and not a disability, and encourages integration and inclusion instead of separation. Accordingly, more and more children with special needs receive special services when learning in special education classes or integrated classes within the framework of the mainstream education (Ainscow et al., 2006; Devarakonda, 2013; Timor, 2013).

Inclusion of children with special needs in the mainstream education requires training of the entire system (Wiggle & Wilcox, 1996). Parents of integrated children expect their children to

receive the treatment they deserve, and often feel a need to defend them. The gap between parents' expectations and teachers' difficulties creates tension and numerous conflicts. Furthermore, the educational team may encounter a situation in which parents whose children are not among the special needs children oppose the integration process (Ministry of Education, 2015).

2.2. Work with Parents during the Internship Period

The first year of the intern is perceived as a unique stage that occurs between the training stage and the specialization stage, in which the intern first experiences the complexity of the relations with the parents. This difficulty led the American National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] (2009) to publish a position paper that affords great weight to development of skills of working with parents during the internship period. Professional loneliness, anxiety, lack of confidence and helplessness are common experiences among preschool and school teachers during their intern year. ECE interns described their communication with parents in terms of "walking on eggs" and perceived it as one of the complex tasks of their work (Levy al., 2019).

Analysis of ECE interns' interactions showed that they cope with difficulties in six main areas: informing parents on their children's problems and recruiting their cooperation; constructing relations of closeness and caring; setting boundaries for parental behavior; fundamental controversies regarding educational worldviews and child-rearing techniques; complaints about the team's routine performance; and difficulties in affording guidance and assistance (Peleg et al., 2019). In many cases, they described difficulties in constructing trust and close relations with parents and an absence of reciprocity. The gap between their investment in the relationship with the families and the results it yielded left them, quite often, disappointed, frustrated and exhausted. The low social prestige of the teaching profession and the parents' perception of the inexperienced interns as a kind of "babysitter" also has a negative influence on parents' willingness to cooperate with them (Mahmood, 2013).

2.3. The Unique Position of the Educational Counselor and Psychologist in the Interaction between Educational Institutions and Parents

In the beginning, the educational counseling profession focused on individual therapy for few, according to the pathogenic medical approach (Erhard & Sinai, 2012). However, since the 1990s, educational counseling positions the systemic paradigm of cultivating comprehensive wellbeing in the center, in the spirit of the salutogenic perception and the proactive approach to advancement of health (Antonovsky, 1998).

Work with parents receives great weight when defining the roles of the counselor in the spirit of the systemic paradigm. Of the entire educational team, it is the educational counselor who is inherently in the middle between the school and the parents. On the one hand she is a representative of the educational institution who meets the student's parents at crossroads, transitions and decision-making processes. Her systemic view of the educational institution's culture positions her as translator of the school language to the concept world of the student's parents. On the other hand, the educational counselor has knowledge in child and family psychology (Erhard, 2014).

The work of the educational counselor with the parents is expressed, first and foremost, in helping the educator develop the relationship between the school and the students' parents through individual counseling or group guidance of parents (Erhard, 2014; Tatar & Bekerman, 2009). The counselor can also assimilate mechanisms and processes that improve communication between members of the educational team and students' families (for example a monthly report, dialog circles), instruct teachers on the principles of positive dialog with students' parents, and promote processes of social justice in order to contribute to transparent, open and trust-building communication between the educational institution and parents from diverse social and cultural groups (Erhard & Sinai, 2012).

Educational counseling for early childhood focuses on leading processes for the promotion of health and well-being in the preschool system, where the main target audience of the counselor is the preschool teacher and team (Aram & Dashevsky, 2004). The role of educational counseling for early childhood evolved over the years into four main aspects: prevention; advice and consultation; guidance; coordination (Bacon & Dougherty, 1992). In recent years, the Ministry of Education has been promoting the role perception of the educational counselor as an educational leader (Wingfield et al., 2010), in particular in contexts of advancing processes of social justice (Anderson, 2009; Erhard & Sinai, 2012).

The intervention of the educational psychologist includes five domains of action: 1) the preschool teacher and team; 2) the preschool children; 3) the parents 4) role partners and the support system; 5) individual and systemic work, in times of stress and crisis. The psychologist plays a major role in accompaniment of parents in the process of recognizing the problem, supporting them, choosing intervention programs and ways of helping in the home and in the preschool, and referral to therapeutic agents in the community, as needed. The preschool psychologist can give lectures for all parents on developmental issues, such as boundaries and parental authority, development of social skills, preparation for first grade, etc. (Ministry of Education, 2013).

2.4. Educational Counseling in a Culturally Diverse, Polarized and Changing Society

The understanding that many of the problems of children and youth handled by the educational counselor are the product of an unjust, restrictive, intolerant society that holds no security for their future shaped the perception that the counselor should play an active role in the struggle to promote social justice (Dahir & Stone, 2004; Hipolito-Delgado & Llee, 2007). This new role definition was intended to afford a solution for old criticism of experts and investigators who claimed that focusing on the individual and neglecting social values lead educational counselors to defend the school system and not the students. According to Erford (2003), educational counselors are still "gatekeepers" of the educational institution to a great extent, preserve social statuses and lead to unfair allocation of resources. They thus perpetuate the obstacles that prevent members of vulnerable groups from advancing in society.

The need to train students and professionals in mental health professions to work effectively in an intercultural environment led the American Psychological Association to formulate documents with detailed instructions pertaining to education, training, research, practice and organizational change in the spirit of the multicultural approach (American Psychological Association, 1993). The characteristics of an educational counselor or psychologist with *cultural competence* are expressed in three main areas: 1) awareness – self-awareness of personal prejudices and biases; 2) knowledge – knowledge on diverse cultures and communities and on social power relations; 3) skills – the ability to use culturally and socially adapted counseling skills or techniques (Sue et al., 1992).

Researches indicate that counselors declare a social role orientation and their intentness on acting as defenders of students from vulnerable groups. However, in practice they use individual intervention methods more than systemic work directed toward a change in policies and processes that pose obstacles to the learning success of students from minority groups and their social mobility. For example, Erhard and Sinai (2012) found that educational counselors tend to express a "social" role perception, but focus on individual work with disadvantaged students, while doing little social-systemic work.

2.5. The Research Questions

The present study investigated how ECE interns perceive the role of educational counselors and psychologists in meaningful authentic events with parents. Special attention was paid to testing the aspect of gender. The research findings can make a significant contribution to knowledge on parent-preschool/school teachers' relationships in the 21st century. They can also help ECE counselors and psychologists learn about the experience and needs of preschool and school teachers in general, and of interns in particular, in everything related to work with parents in a

diverse, polarized and dynamic society. ECE counselors and psychologists can use this knowledge and understanding in order to pinpoint their role and afford the educational teams an optimal educational-therapeutic solution.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This is a qualitative study based on content analysis, according to the principles of grounded theory (Creswell, 1998), combined with descriptive statistics. The qualitative methodology helped us explore ECE interns' perceptions of the role of educational counselors and psychologists in authentic events with parents, as well as the meaning they gave these interactions. In addition to the qualitative analysis, we used descriptive statistics, in order to expand and deepen our understanding of the qualitative analysis findings. In fact, the quantitative analysis added information that could not have been derived solely from qualitative analysis, as will be detailed further on.

3.2. Participants

The participants included 24 (female) intern students who studied in the Early Childhood Education program (ages 3-8) in a well- known teacher training institution in Israel. They all participated in the compulsory course "Cultivation of skill for working with parents in the 21st century", in 2017-2018. Concomitantly to their studies in their fourth and last year of the program, they worked as interns in ECE institutions within the framework of a practicum year. Most of the interns (85%) worked as kindergarten teachers (ages 3-6). The remainder (15%) worked as school teachers in first and second grade. The present study is a continuation research to the study of (Peleg et al. 2019) that exposed difficulties and challenges that characterize ECE interns in interactions with parents. The present study was aimed at an in-depth investigation, for the first time, into 24 events with parents (out of 143 events described in the previous study), in which an educational counselor and/or psychologist was involved. The events were collected in the previous study but were not analyzed in these aspects. The presence of a counselor or psychologist was not mentioned in the remaining 119 events, and they were therefore not included in the present study.

3.3. Instruments

The research tools were questions which the students answered regarding written descriptions of significant events with parents that they chose to describe. Each student in the course was required to write about a significant event which involved parents to children aged 3-8. The event could be taken from her work as an intern preschool/school teacher or from her practicum with a coaching preschool or school teacher during her year of training. The questions which the participants answered when writing the event were: 1) Think about a significant event that is related to the relationship between the education frameworks and children's parents; 2) Write the event in a detailed manner, with reference to the context of the preschool/class and the characteristics of the family represented in the event; 3) Give a title to the event.

3.4. Data analysis

Only 24 events (16.7%) of all social events with parents that were written by early childhood education interns (143) and were analyzed in detail in the article by (Peleg et al., 2019) included educational counselors and/or psychologists, and were analyzed in the present study. Content analysis raised four main themes: identity of the counseling agent and extent of the intervention's success; topics of the intervention; characteristics of the role of the counseling agent; gender aspects in the intervention – involvement of fathers compared to mothers. Descriptive statistics were then used to test the frequency of each of the aspects raised in the main themes.

3.5. Ethical Aspects of the Study

The lecturers of the course asked the students' consent to use the events they described for the purposes of this study, while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. It was emphasized that participation in the study is not part of the course requirements, and that data analysis would be performed only after all students received their final grade in the course. Students who were interested in participating in the study signed a form of voluntary participation in the research. The names of the students and identifying details of the education frameworks were deleted.

4. Findings

In this section we present analysis of 24 social events with parents, that were described by ECE interns. Analysis will refer to each of the following four criteria: 1) Identity of the counseling agent and extent of the intervention's success; 2) Topics of the intervention; 3) Characteristics of the role of the counseling agent; 4) Gender aspects in the intervention – involvement of fathers compared to mothers.

4.1. Identity of the Counseling Agent and Extent of the Intervention's Success

Analysis of the distribution of the references of the ECE interns according to the identity of the counseling agent showed that the interns referred to educational counselors in 16 (67%) of the 24 events investigated in this study. In ten events it was teachers and in six it was kindergarten teachers who referred to an educational counselor for help. Reference to a psychologist took place in only eight events (33%). Only kindergarten teachers referred to a psychologist. Teachers tend to refer to the educational counselor, whereas kindergarten teachers tend to refer more to the preschool psychologist.

   Testing the success of the professional intervention in the sampled events showed that in events which involved an educational counselor (n=16), improvement was reported in seven events (44%), compared to nine events (56%) in which no improvement was reported. In contradistinction, in events which involved a psychologist (n=8), no improvement was reported in six events (75%), and in two additional events (25%) the outcome of the psychologist's intervention is not known.

4.2. Topics of the Intervention

Analysis of the intervention topics indicated that in the majority of cases (20 events which comprise 83%), ECE interns referred to a counseling agent (counselor and/or psychologist) on a background of difficulties in informing parents about their children's developmental disabilities or other prominent problems and in recruitment of parents' cooperation. For example, Anna stated:

> I invited Deborah's parents to discuss her cognitive, linguistic and communicative difficulties. April, the kindergarten psychologist I work with, also participated in this meeting. We showed them the findings of observations and evaluations that we had conducted with Deborah. At the end of the meeting, April recommended to refer Deborah to a special education framework. Her parents didn't want to hear about this option: they expressed complete refusal. In the next conversation, their attitude even became vehement, and they demanded that observations of their daughter cease. April and I decided it would be best to leave them alone for a while.

   In two events (8%), the interns referred to counseling on a background of difficulties in building trust and close relations with the parents. In this regard, Naomi remembered:

> One day I played a game with the children called "What's missing in the storage room?". The next day, a group of angry parents waited for me, since one of the mothers told the other parents that I had locked the children in the storage room! I was doubly insulted. First, because the parents actually believed, that I would lock their children in the storage room. Second, from the way that mother had chosen to act upon this mistaken information. Instead of talking with me to find out what had really happened, she told the other parents and riled them up. Shocked and hurt, I turned to our educational counselor for comfort and assistance. She calmed me down and guided me in resolving this misunderstanding.

In another two events (8%), referral was made following difficulties in setting boundaries for parental behavior that is inappropriate, disrespectful or violent. In this context, Alex mentioned:

> One of the children, Arthur, didn't want to go back to the kindergarten after a long vacation. What did his mother do? She verbally assaulted me in a series of questions and accusations, questioning my professionalism: "How long have you been a kindergarten teacher?"; "What are you doing here that makes the kids not want to come back to kindergarten?". I was so offended. I didn't know what to do. I felt so small and helpless. Helen, the kindergarten counsellor, was very understanding and helpful. I invited her to a meeting with Arthur's mother. She helped the mother understand that she had behaved in a disrespectful way towards me. The mother was sorry and apologized to me. It turned out that she felt powerless herself. We decided to cooperate, and Arthur returned to kindergarten happy and satisfied.

These topics are in agreement with three of the six topics that occupied ECE interns in interactions with parents, as found in the previous study (Peleg et al., 2019). However, ECE interns did not refer to the educational counselor and/or psychologist regarding the other issues that occupied them in the context of relationships with parents: fundamental controversies regarding educational worldviews and child-rearing techniques; complaints about the team's routine performance; and difficulties in affording guidance and assistance.

4.3. Characteristics of the Role of the Counseling Agent

Table 1 presents the distribution of the role characteristics of the counseling agent (counselor or psychologist), as indicated by analysis of meaningful authentic events described in writing by ECE interns in the context of communication with parents. These characteristics are based on the role perception of the educational counseling agents, as defined and promoted by the Ministry of Education in Western countries, including Israel (Ministry of Education, 2013; Wingfield et al, 2010).

Table 1

Distribution of role characteristics of the educational counselor and psychologist in interactions with parents, based on meaningful authentic events

Role characteristic	C involved N=12	P involved N=8	C and P involved N=4
Individual counseling and instruction for the educational team	12 (100%)	8 (100%)	4 (100%)
Individual counseling for parents	6 (50%)	8 (100%)	3 (75%)
Managerial aspects vis-à-vis students and vis-à-vis parents (professional authority, disciplinary inquiry, setting boundaries, imposing sanctions)	8 (66%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)
Participation in inter-professional committees and meetings (supervisors and instructors, welfare agents, etc).	1 (8%)	2 (25%)	3 (75%)
Mediation and coordination between the education institution and aid agencies in the community	1 (8%)	1 12/5%)	1 (25%)
Individual counseling or therapy for students	4 (33%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)
Observations of the child in the kindergarten/school	2 (16%)	7 (87/5%)	2 (50%)
Planning and guiding developmental and preventive programs for children	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Group counseling and instruction for the educational team	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Group counseling for parents	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Note. C involved: events in which a counselor is involved; P involced: events in which a psychologist is involved; C and P involved: events in which a counselor and a psychologist are involved

4.3.1. Individual work with the educational team, parents and students

Data analysis indicated that the counselors and psychologists afforded individual counseling and instruction to the educational team in all events sampled in this study. Individual consultation was given to parents in all events in which a psychologist was involved, compared to half of the events

in which a counselor was involved. Individual consultation was given to the parents in 75% of the events in which a counselor and a psychologist were involved together.

Students were given Individual counseling or therapy in half of the events in which a psychologist was present, compared to one-third of the events in which a counselor was present. Furthermore, the psychologists held observations in 87.5% of the events, compared to the counselors who made observations in 16% of the events. Observations were made in half of the events in which a counselor and a psychologist were present together.

An example of a kindergarten conselor's involvement in in individual work with a student, her mother and the kindergarten teacher can be found in Emilia's story:

> Poor Adele was 5 years old when her father died of a serious illness. From a happy and sociable child she became sad and withdrawn. Her mother turned to me for help. Rona, the kindergarten counselor, made observations and built a systemic treatment plan for her. She met with Adele personally and helped her express her feelings through socio-dramatic play and puppetry. At the same time, she also met with the mother and me for guidance sessions. At the end of the year, Adele came back to smile. Her mother thanked me and the counselor from the bottom of her heart. It was a defining moment to keep and cherish.

4.3.2. Managerial aspects vis-à-vis parents and students

In 66% of the events in which a counselor participated, she was involved in managerial aspects vis-à-vis parents and students (employing professional authority, setting boundaries, imposing sanctions), whereas a psychologist who participated in an event never participated in managerial aspects. Managerial aspects were identified in half of the events in which a counselor and a psychologist participated together. An example of a counselor's involvement in managerial aspects can be found in Joy's words:

> Well, as a first grade homeroom teacher during an internship period, I can tell you there are many challenges. One of the students, Tommy, had a hard time learning to read, he had ADHD and at some point he started hitting the kids in the class. I asked his mother to come to a meeting, but she did not come. After he was again involved in a violent incident, I called his mother again. She told me she was busy and that it wasn't her problem if I didn't know how to control my students. What audacity. Sophia, our school counselor, helped me. She invited both parents for a conversation and straightened them out. They respected her expertise and authority.

4.3.3. Social-systemic work

Participation in inter-professional committees was observed in 75% of the events in which a counselor and a psychologist participated together. Involvement of counselors and psychologists in aspects of mediation and coordination between the education institution and aid agencies in the community was identified in a quarter of the cases. Involvement was lower in events in which a psychologist or counselor participated separately. An example of a school psychologist's and a school counselor's involvement in collaborative social- systemic work can be found in Michelle's story:

> I was very worried about Daniel. He did not come to class regularly, and his achievements were low. In class he always seems distracted and emotionally unavailable for learning. During breaks, he was always alone. There was suspicion of neglect on the part of the parents. I participated in an interprofessional committee with the school psychologist, the school counselor and the social worker. Together we built an intervention plan.

4.3.4. Group work with the educational team and with parents

No involvement of any of the therapeutic agents in the described events was observed for anything pertaining to group counseling to the educational team or group guidance to parents.

4.3.5. Development and prevention programs

None of the therapeutic agents in the described events participated in the aspect of planning and guiding developmental and preventive programs for students.

4.4. Gender Aspects in the Intervention – Involvement of Fathers Compared to Mothers

When testing the gender identity of the counseling agent, it is important to stress that all counseling agents (counselors and psychologists) were women. The educational agents, i.e. the ECE interns who participated in the study, were also women. Table 2 presents the distribution of the parents' participation in the events, according to gender.

Table 2
Distribution of the parents' involvement in the events from a gender perspective

Gender	C involved N=12	P involved N=8	C and P involved N=4
Mother's involvement	8 (66%)	7 (87.5%)	1 (25%)
Father's involvement	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Parents' involvement	4 (33.3%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (75%)

Analysis of the parents' participation in events described by the ECE interns according to the criterion of the parent's gender shows that mothers' participation was very prominent. The mothers participated in all meetings with the educational counselor. In 66.6% of the meetings, only the mother participated, and in 33.3% of the meetings the mother and father were present together. The father did not participate alone in any of the meetings with the educational counselor.

The mother also participated in all meetings with the psychologist, whereas the father participated together with the mother in one meeting. The father never participated in a meeting with the psychologist alone. The mother was present at all meetings in events in which a counselor and a psychologist were involved. She participated alone in 25% of the meetings, whereas the mother and the father participated together in 75% of the meetings.

5. Discussion

5.1. Role of Educational Counselors and Psychologists as Perceived by ECE Interns: Preservation of an individual counseling-psychological orientation as opposed to the systemic proactive perception of cultivating general wellbeing and social justice

Analysis of the data indicated that the educational counselors and psychologists were perceived by the ECE interns first and foremost in their traditional function of experts in the field of mental health and as having an individual counseling-psychological orientation (Erhard & Sinai, 2012). In most cases they asked for help in coping with parents, on a background of developmental disabilities or prominent problems of students, a field of difficulty at the focus of interns' work with parents (Peleg et al., 2019).

The educational counselor was described by the interns as the significant figure and as having a larger amount and more diverse role aspects than the psychologists. Analysis of the characteristics of the role of the educational counselor based on authentic significant events in interactions with parents indicated that of the four main roles of the counselor: prevention; counseling and advising; instruction; coordination (Bacon & Dougherty, 1992), the involvement and contribution of the counselor is most prominent in roles of counseling and instruction. She supplied counseling and instruction services to the educational team (in all of the events) and to parents (in half of the events),and was also involved to a lesser degree in carrying out observations on students and affording a therapeutic solution for students. Nonetheless, all the counselor's counseling and guidance services described in the events by the interns were at the individual and not at the group level.

The educational counselor's involvement in the aspect of participation in inter-professional committees and mediation between the educational institution and the community was significantly lower (less than a tenth, in both cases), while she was not mentioned at all as being involved in the aspect of prevention. A surprising aspect raised from the data is the extent of the educational counselor's involvement and influence in aspects of management (more than half of

the events), such as demonstrating professional authority or setting boundaries and imposing sanctions. This role characteristic was unique to the educational counselor, compared to the educational psychologist who was not involved in management aspects at all (only when the meetings were together with the counselor). This managerial-authoritative aspect also reflects the complexity of the educational counselor's role, since a managerial-authoritative aspect may be in conflict with other role characteristics, such as counseling and consultation, which require an empathic non-judgmental approach and acceptance.

The characteristics of the educational counselor's role, as portrayed by ECE interns in the current study, stress her availability, her diverse roles (therapeutic, managerial and systemic) and her meaningful contribution to the ECE interns, in particular in maintenance and emotional support, consultation and counseling. However, the counseling, consultation and instruction services afforded to the interns were solely at the individual level, and did not include group counseling to the educational team or group instruction to parents. At the same time, the counselor's part in systemic aspects of mediation and coordination vis-à-vis community agents was significantly lower compared to the other role characteristics (therapeutic and managerial). Furthermore, all consultations with the counselor that were reported by the ECE interns took place after the appearance of different difficulties (secondary prevention level), and not at the proactive primary prevention level, similarly to findings in other studies (Erhard & Sinai, 2012; Wenkert, 2010).

The management aspects that the counselors exhibited in the events described by the ECE interns did not necessarily herald a transition to educational leadership that advances social justice. They were not intended to lead to social changes in the educational institution or defend students or parents from vulnerable social groups, but rather to defend the educational team (the interns) and the education system. In this sense, it cannot be said that the educational counselors succeeded in repositioning themselves in the eyes of the ECE interns as educational leaders who lead social change (Cohen et al., 2022 ; Singh et al., 2010 ; Wingfield et al., 2010). Rather, they served in their traditional-authoritative role as "gatekeepers" of the educational institutions who help, even if unwittingly, to preserve the social status quo and transcribe the discrimination of vulnerable groups (Erford, 2003).

Analysis of the findings indicated that the work of the educational psychologist was characterized almost absolutely by a psychological-individual orientation, and had the nature of counseling after the appearance of different difficulties (secondary prevention level), or diagnosis for making decisions pertaining to the eligibility for special services (tertiary prevention level). There was no indication for the psychologist's work at the proactive primary prevention level. The availability and accessibility of the psychologist was also less prominent compared to that of the educational counselor: kindergarten teachers used the services of both the educational psychologist and the counselor, whereas first and second grade educators did not use the psychologist's services at all in the described events, but rather referred to the educational counselors.

How can we explain the fact that the ECE interns' main use for the counseling agents (counselors and psychologists) was for instruction, counseling and consultations services at the individual-psychological level? Indeed, this use can indicate not only the ECE interns' (perception) of the roles of the counseling agents, but also the interns' emotional state and the unique professional development stage at which they are found, a stage characterized by a high level of anxiety, lack of knowledge and professional experience, and shortage of skills and effective professional tools (Levy et al., 2019; Mahmood, 2013; Peleg et al., 2019). They thus used the counselors and psychologists mainly for relieving their sense of professional loneliness, emotional maintenance and processing of stressful experiences, as well as for consulting about specific students who make it difficult for them to manage the kindergarten/classroom or who exhibit prominent developmental problems (Lee et al., 2022; Manowaluilou & Reeve, 2022).

5.2. "Where is the father?"- High Involvement of Mothers in Preschool Life Compared to Fathers

Analysis of the gender axis in our study indicated the extent to which ECE is a gendered field (i.e. almost exclusively feminine). The counseling agents, as well as the educational agents, were all women. Furthermore, the mother's high involvement in meetings with the educational counselor as well as with the psychologists was prominent, compared to the low involvement of the father.

These findings indicate that gender stereotypes still shape the perceptions of the educational team (that is composed almost entirely of women) and of the parents themselves, regarding the role division between mothers and fathers in everything related to raising, cultivating and educating children. In spite of the change in the public discourse and the consolidation of models of "new fatherhood" (Oren et al., 2010), mothers still perceive themselves and are perceived by the educational team as the children's main caregivers, such that the partnership and everyday communication of the educational team takes place mainly with them. These findings echo the study of Devarakonda (2013) who found that kindergarten teachers tend to supply information on the children to mothers, but not to fathers.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Kindergarten and elementary school teachers in their intern year are found in a risk group in their professional development stage. It is therefore crucial to preserve the emotional support, the counseling and the instruction services supplied to them by the educational counselors and psychologists, in this sensitive period. These recommendations are supported by recent studies that indicate a strong relationship between pre-service teachers' self-efficacy and functioning and the quality of their support system (Ellis et al., 2020 ; Lee et al., 2022 ; Manowaluilou & Reeve, 2022 ; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). Most teachers who did not pursue their teaching career after their first year of teaching was because of job dissatisfaction (Caprara et al., 2003), which implies a need for mental and emotional support (Klassen & Tze, 2014; Buric et al., 2017).

Counselors, psychologists, supervision agents and teacher training institutions should inform the educational team and the interns regarding the diverse roles of the counseling team, including their commitment to social- systemic work. In fact, It was found that educating others about the school counselor role of advocate was one of the strategies used by school counselors who self-identified as social justice agents, to advocate for systemic change within their school communities (Singh et al., 2010). Kindergarten teachers and elementary school educators who embrace strategic leadership can join the counseling agents in promoting moral goodness and social justice, in the educational settings (Okanda et al., 2021).

Educational teams should be aware of the influence of gender stereotypes on their interactions with parents. An egalitarian and balanced role division between the mothers and the fathers will alleviate the mothers' burden, strengthen the educational partnership with the fathers and will lead to better functioning of the children (Deverakonda, 2013). Strengthening the educational partnership with fathers can be carried out through personal summoning of both parents, use of inclusive language and organizing activities that are adapted to the needs, skills and preferences of parents of both genders (Kahn, 2006).

7. Research Limitations and Recommendations for Future Studies

The present study is a qualitative research and generalization from the findings is therefore limited. The research conclusions were based on an indirect analysis of the involvement of educational counselors and psychologists in descriptions of ECE interns of meaningful authentic events with parents. It can be useful to ask the interns direct questions regarding their cooperation with the therapeutic team. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate the distribution of the families in the events according to social and cultural diversity.

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