

The relationship between parents of disabled children and professionals: Is there burn out?

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This paper will present the findings that emanated from five workshops organized by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and which attempted to address an everyday problem in the life of professionals who work with disabled children in Cyprus. The main aim of the workshops was to investigate whether professionals who work at segregated settings (special schools) in Cyprus experience the feeling of burn out, and if so, to develop suggestions about preventing and dealing with teacher burn-out.

The idea of organizing those workshops came up in a meeting with the Special Education Counsellor and the three psychologists who work in the segregated settings in Cyprus. It was evident from the conversation that the large proportion of professionals who work at those settings needed immediate support. Thus, the concept of organizing five workshops which aimed to support these professionals arose.

Teachers from the 4 special schools in Nicosia were divided into three groups. Each group had approximately 30 professionals and was co-coordinated by a psychologist with the special education counsellor present purely for taking notes. Participation was compulsory and no one was allowed to change group. Each meeting had a specific subject and all the groups had to do the same activities and work in the same setting. The variety of activities and the structure of each meeting were decided prior to the workshop by the special education counsellor and the psychologists.

The methodology that had been used is group interview, since the largest amount of data had been gathered during the conversation in the workshops. Also a rating scale was used in order to enrich our data. Parameters such as the number of years that the individuals have worked in segregated settings, the educational background of each professional, age, gender and the previous experience of each teacher were taken into consideration in the analysis of the data. We used qualitative methods of analysis and specifically grounded theory, which we believe best suited this project. In order to understand if professionals experienced the feeling of burn out, we investigate the various parameters that seemed to make them feel stressed and unhappy. One of the major findings was that the attitude and behaviour of the parents of disabled students seemed to be a contributing factor in the development of feelings of burn out. This paper attempts to present why the relationship between parents of disabled student and the professionals may result in the experience of feelings of burn out and how those feelings can be minimized in order to help the disabled student, its family and the professional. Additionally the structure, organization and functioning of the educational system of Cyprus, which gives the impression that the voices of the professionals and the parents of disabled students who desperately ask for support and help are ignored or only selectively heard, also appear to be contributing factors to teacher burn out. We believe that an equal and functional partnership between the parents of disabled students and professionals must be the goal in order to help the field of special education to move forward.