

The Mentor Institution in Greek Secondary School Education: Necessity or Utopia?

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Abstract: This empirical study aims at highlighting the importance of the mentor institution in the Greek educational reality, by investigating the views and attitudes of teachers in secondary education concerning the contribution of the mentor institution to their induction, support and professional development. To conduct this study, a quantitative scale method of collecting numerical data through a structured questionnaire were used. The sample taken into consideration consists of 96 secondary education teachers of various teaching specialties from the Greek islands of Ikaria and Fourni. The study findings revealed that teachers agree to the implementation of the mentor institution in the Greek educational system.

Key words: mentor, secondary education, implementation

1. Introduction

It is known that the mentor constitutes one of the most widely used strategies for supporting, socializing, encouraging and guiding teachers internationally, encouraging their personal and professional development and contributing to high quality pedagogical and teaching work (Andrews et al., 2007, pp. 4–13; Bezzina, 2006, pp. 411–430; Fan Tang & Choi, 2005, p. 384; Gabel-Dunk & Craft, 2004, pp. 277–295; Green-Powell, 2012, pp. 99–106; Hansman, 2003, pp. 14–16; Lim, 2005, pp. 106–110; Mavriorgiorgos, 1999, pp. 93–135). The new conditions that constantly arise in the modern educational environment highlight the need to apply this institution both to welcome, support and guide newcomer teachers and also to redefine the career path of the most experienced ones (Fan Tang & Choi, 2005, pp. 383–401; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004, pp. 1–24).

Incorporating professional development within the school context through institutionalised support and guidance mechanisms promotes the exploratory, critical and constructive activation of all teachers so that the school can be transformed into a professional learning community, contributing in this way to develop its internal policy (Ifanti & Vozaitis, 2005, pp. 28–44; Hawley & Valli, 1999, pp. 127–150).

In particular, counselling guidance supports the professional development of novice teachers and contributes to upgrade the educational context in which they operate. Through constant teaching, emotional and professional support, novice teachers develop their sociality and eliminate the tendencies of isolation they often experience as they enter the new school environment, confronting calmly the “shock of reality” (Hobson et al., 2009, pp. 207–216; Boutscu & Hadjipanayotou, 2014, p. 601).

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Therefore, through the mentoring process they become familiar with their new role and feel active members of the school community and communicators of the knowledge and experiences the mentor bequeaths them (Philips & Fragoulis, 2010, p. 203). They also improve their teaching techniques and pedagogical practices in issues of classroom management, lesson planning and organization, differentiated teaching and the use of assessment data in the educational process (Everston & Smithey, 2000, pp. 294–304; Karava, 2016, pp. 73–87; Bagakis, 2017, pp. 7–10; Moor et al., 2005, pp. 26–38; Petsas, 2015, pp. 180–189; Fletcher & Barrett, 2004, pp. 321–333).

Starting with the finding of Gordon & Brobeck (2010, pp. 427–447) that adequate support and effective guidance help experienced teachers at both a personal and a professional level, as they experience common problems in classroom with novice teachers, their need to claim access to their professional development at all stages of their developmental route is recognised and gradually develop their professional identity (Ifanti, 2014: 203–216v; Ifanti & Vozaitis, 2007, pp. 87–105; Ifanti & Photopoulou, 2010, pp. 122–139; Ifanti & Photopoulou, 2011a, pp. 70–83; Ifanti & Photopoulou, 2011b, pp. 69–93; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005, pp. 275–287; Photopoulou & Ifanti, 2014, pp. 81–99).

Through peer-to-peer/mutual mentoring, while acting simultaneously both as mentors and mentees, they interact and develop an evolving relationship that focuses on the content both of their shared teaching and their daily work in an effort to facilitate each other's professional development (Daresh, 2003, p. 23; Jones & Brown, 2011, pp. 401–418; Johnson & Daire, 2008, pp. 28–35; Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005, pp. 279–281; Lejonberg et al., 2015, pp. 142–158).

The benefits that come from mentoring are significant for the school unit. In particular, the professional development of newcomer teachers serves as a nucleus around which all the productive forces of the school come together. In this way, through the provision of personalised help and support by the mentor both at personal and professional level, guidance is achieved and the development of all teachers in the school unit is promoted (Hobson et al., 2009, p. 210). Moreover, collaborative relationships are encouraged and the idea of a professional learning community at the school is promoted (Feiman-Nemser, 2010, pp. 15–30; Moor et al., 2005, pp. 63–45; Phillips & Fragoulis, 2010, pp. 211–213), which becomes the recipient of teacher action (Carter & Francis, 2001, pp. 249–262; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000, p. 52). Therefore, the mentor-teacher relationship promotes a school community, fertile not only for the professional support of teachers but also for the overall development of students through the quality upgrading of their school experiences (Everston & Smithey, 2000, pp. 294–304).

2. Goal and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of the mentor institution in the Greek educational reality by exploring secondary education teachers' perceptions of a geographically isolated educational district in terms of the contribution the institution to their support, reception and professional development. In addition, the enrichment of educational research with new empirical data in the context of the operation of educational support structures is sought. The key research question posed in this empirical study was whether the mentor institution is a realistic and pedagogically applicable educational practice to enhance the professional culture of teachers and which factors determine the success of this institution, according to the teachers' perceptions.

The research questions raised in the present investigation were the following:

Research question 1: The younger teachers are more positive towards the mentor institution than the older ones.

Research question 2: The more experienced teachers are more positive towards the mentor institution than the less ones.

Research question 3: The more highly qualified teachers are more favorable to the mentor institution than the less ones.

Research question 4: Differences in views between non-permanent and permanent teachers concerning the mentor institution are not expected to be noticed.

Research question 6: Differences in views among teachers concerning the type of school in secondary education are expected to be noticed.

Research question 6: A positive correlation among all four subscales of the measuring tool is expected to be noticed.

3. Material and Method

The basic research question and the individual research hypotheses of the present study led to the choice of the quantitative method of data collection, using a structured questionnaire¹ in order to draw statistical conclusions that reflect the views of secondary education teachers on the contribution of the mentor institution to their reception, support and professional development. The sample of the research was 96 secondary education teachers of all specialties from the total population of the 117 teachers who worked in secondary school units in Ikaria and Fourni during the school year 2017–2018.

The questionnaire consists of 6 close-ended nominal scale questions and 1 demographic question. The teachers' main views on the subject under investigation were recorded through 11 close-ended questions that tested teachers' perceptions and attitudes on four levels: (a) the necessity to implement the mentor institution: 3 questions, (b) the role and benefit of the mentor: 5 questions, c) the criteria of his/her selection: 2 questions and d) the conditions for its implementation to the Greek educational reality: 1 question.

The questions were structured according to the ordering scale (questions B3, C2a, C2b, C2c, C3), graded sequence (Creswell, 2011, pp. 203–204) and the five-point Likert scale (questions B1, B2, C1, D1, D2, E1). A pilot study was conducted to check the functionality and to determine the effectiveness of the research tool of this study. After the pilot implementation, the questionnaire was finalized so that the field survey can be conducted.

As far as the demographic characteristics of the participating teachers were concerned, 40 teachers were men (42%) and 56 women (58%). Moreover, 45 of them were non-permanent (47%) and 51 permanent teachers (53%), 24 served in a junior high school (25%), 40 in a senior high school (42%), 25 in a vocational high school (26%) and 7 in a special vocational education and training laboratory (7%).

In terms of additional academic studies of the teachers, 7 of them owned a second university degree (7.8%), 42 were postgraduate degree or doctoral holders (46.7%) and 41 (42.7%) had a long-term training experience (a yearly one, in PEKs, etc.). As far as the age group and the years of teaching experience of the participants, it is worth noting that the teachers aged up to 25 years old and those with more than 25 years of teaching experience are

¹ This research tool comes from the Pappas & Iordanides (2017) research questionnaire and has been slightly modified for the needs of the present study. It therefore provides the possibility of comparing its results with those of the aforementioned researchers, ensuring validity and reliability at a satisfactory level.

underrepresented in this sample ($N = 2$, 2.1% and $N = 5$, 5.2% respectively). Finally, there is a plethora of different specialties in this study (e.g., chemists, mathematicians etc.) with the philologists of the Greek language to be the highest percentage, which however does not exceed 15%.

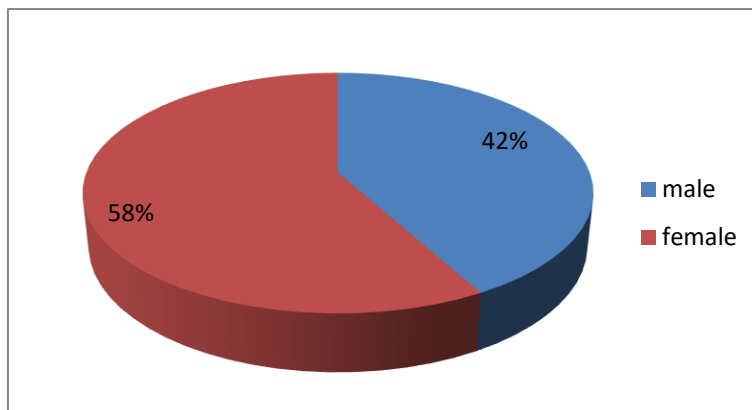


Figure 1 Gender

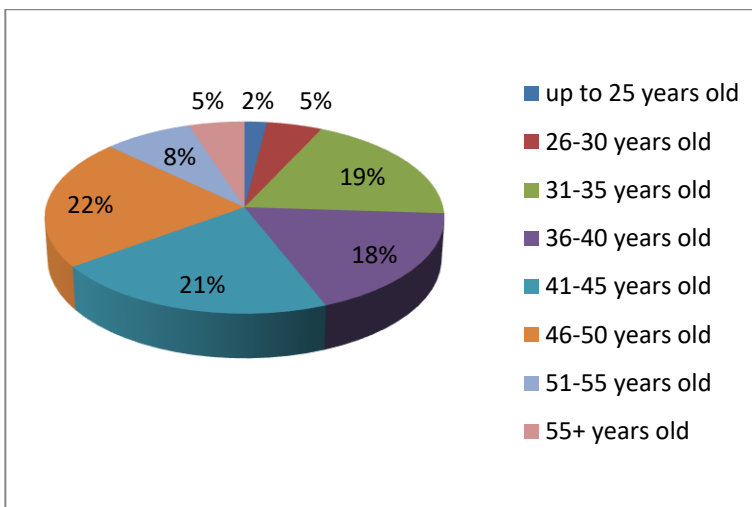


Figure 2 Age Groups

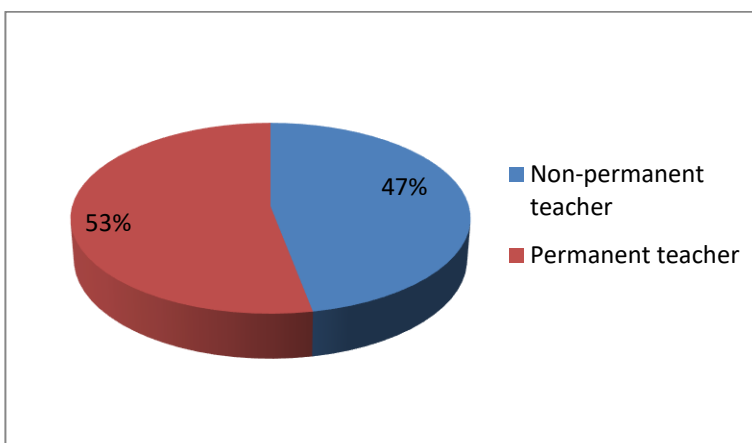


Figure 3 Employment Relationship

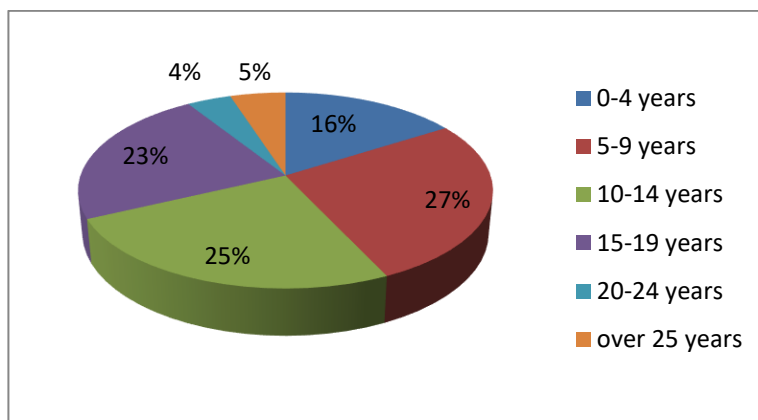


Figure 4 Total Educational Experience

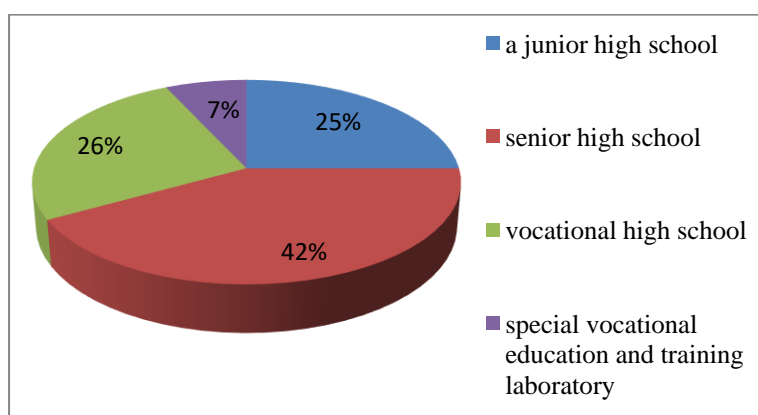


Figure 5 Type of School

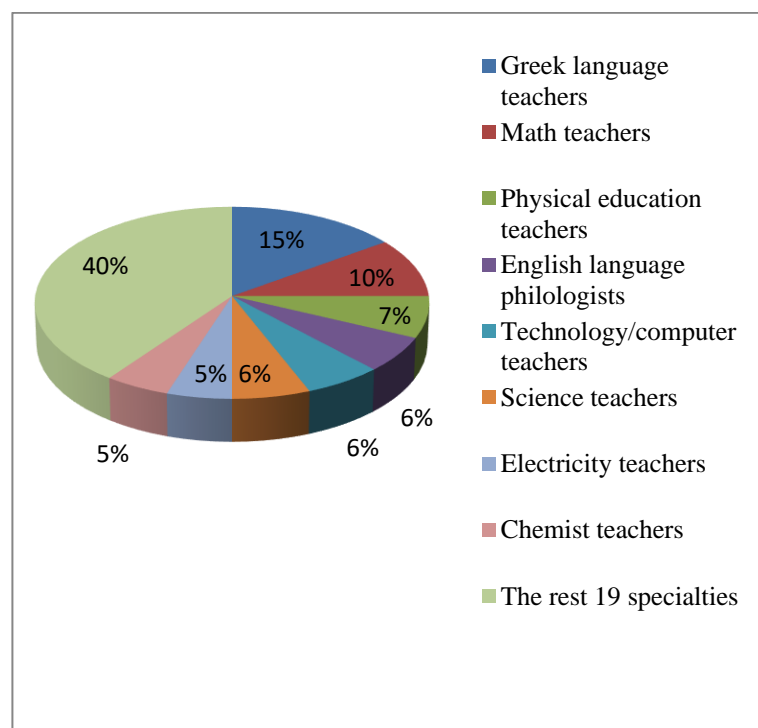


Figure 6 Specialties of Teachers

4. Findings

4.1 Teachers' Views on the Necessity of Implementing the Mentor Institution

As far as the necessity of implementing the mentor institution is concerned, the participating teachers responded that they consider it necessary to implement the mentor institution for novice teachers in the context of addressing their particular learning needs (82%). Other significant difficulties that make the implementation of the mentorship necessary are the mismatch between university-academic education and educational reality (80%), the occupational stress during their adaptation to the school environment (79%), the classroom management (72%), the design and implementation of teaching (70%), the allocation of the teaching time (70%), the administrative issues (63%) and their smooth integration into the educational community (59%)

Interpersonal relationships with colleagues (7%) and parents (13%) seem to be reasons of less importance concerning the implementation of the institution.

The most important difficulties experienced by experienced teachers and the needs they wish to meet through the implementation of the mentor institution relate to being informed about innovations (88%), addressing particular learning needs (82%), updating pedagogical knowledge and its interconnection with teaching practice (81%), their occupational stress when trying to adapt to new data (74%), enriching their teaching practice (69%), the classroom management (63%) and expanding educational networks-fora (56%). Designing and implementing of teaching (22%), working with other colleagues (22%) and allocating teaching time (20%) are difficulties that they appear to face but to a lesser extent, however.

When asked about the factors that make the implementation of the mentor institution essential, the participants consider it necessary to apply the mentor institution to the Greek education system because they consider that the school counsellor institution (76%), the introductory training (67%), the head of the school unit (66%) and the university education (55%) cannot meet all the needs of the newcomer teachers. Additionally, a large percentage (67%) believes that mentors can help improve the work of novice teachers because they feel that their initial experiences determine their educational route (65%). They also think that mentors can help experienced teachers (31%), solve manage administrative-bureaucratic issues (30%) and facilitate collaboration with other colleagues (31%) and parents (21%) in smaller percentages, however.

4.2 Teachers' Views on the Role and the Benefit of the Mentor

The interviewed teachers highly rated the mentor should act as a consultant (91%), a trainer (90%), an animator (87%), a supporter (87%), an innovator (85%), a facilitator of collaboration (85%). (85%), a promoter of in-school collaboration (85%), a critical friend (76%), a working model (75%) and an instructor (58%). However, disagreement percentages on the perceived functions of the mentor as a supervisor (69%) and an evaluator (83%) are high.

In addition, they consider significant the fact that the mentor should provide psychological support to the newcomer teachers in areas such as adapting to real school conditions (75%), the classroom management (72%), and their abrupt transition from academic to professional life, (69%), the awareness of their obligations (69%), the positive approach to emerging problems (68%), fostering a cooperative school culture (66%) and enhancing their self-confidence and encouragement (65%). They also believe that novice teachers need moral support (35%) and support both at a personal level (24%) and parent management (22%) to a lesser extent, however.

In terms of teaching support for novice teachers, the mentor's contribution is considered by the participants to be highly significant in presenting sample teaching (71%), enriching teaching and pedagogical methods (70%), creating teaching scenarios (64%), the classroom management (63%), structuring personal teaching strategies (57%), fulfilling personalized learning needs (56%), forming communicative learning (52%), and developing motivation for pupils (52%). The mentors' teaching support for novice teachers in the selection of supervisory sources (44%) and the content and course flow (44%) is considered quite significant.

In addition, they consider the mentor's professional support for novice teachers to be of great importance in issues such as encouraging the use of innovative teaching practices (74%), the co-operation in developing innovative programs based on the needs of students (71%), the gradual construction of their professional autonomy (67%), their smooth integration into the new professional environment (64%), the facilitation of collaboration in the school unit (64%) and the construction of their professional identity (59%). Quite significant but to a lesser extent are considered the mentors' professional support for novice teachers in structuring their personal teaching profile (46%), the managing-resolving administrative issues (38%), and the development of self-assessment (28%).

Participants perceive the role of the mentor to be very significant in experienced teachers and correlate it with encouraging the use of innovative teaching practices (69%), creating a positive school climate (68%), integrating professional development in the school unit (67%), fostering a collaborative culture in it (67%), assisting professional development as a lifelong process (65%), transforming gradually the school into a learning community (65%), collaborating on innovative programs based on the needs of pupils (63%), updating of pedagogical knowledge (58%) and the critical re-negotiation of their teaching profile (53%). To a lesser extent, they consider significant the mentor's assistance in areas that concern the correlation of pedagogical knowledge with teaching practice (36%) and the support the technical aspects of their teaching (28%).

4.3 Teachers' Views on the Selection Criteria and the Characteristics of the Mentor

The teachers surveyed perceive to a great extent that at a cognitive level the mentor is required to have pedagogical training (96%), teaching methodology (95%), much teaching experience (91%), psychology knowledge (88%), training in adult education (81%), administrative knowledge (80%), ICT certification (77%), postgraduate / doctoral studies (71%), as well as research work-publications (51%). Moreover, a large percentage of the participants believe that the mentor should be of the same specialty as the new teacher (88%).

The results of the research reveal the necessary traits that a mentor must possess in order to perform his/her duties effectively. Teachers highly state that the mentor should be cooperative (97%), devoted and willing to help (97%), a good listener (96%), communicative (95%), receptive to diversity (95%), alternative (94%), organizational (93%), flexible (93%), inspirational (92%), insightful (89%), innovative (88%) and visionary (84%).

4.4 Teachers' Views on the Prerequisites of Effectively Implementing the Mentor Institution

The participants perceive as particularly important prerequisites for effective implementation of the mentor institution his/her training (94%), the time available for mentor-mentee collaboration (91%), the selection of mentors from a national record with clear criteria of evaluation (90%), the in-school integration of the institution (89%), the structured mentorship programs in collaboration with the mentor (86%), the implementation of the institution in the school unit for handling personalized needs (82%), the successful mentor-mentee linkage at an interpersonal level (81%), the orientation of the mentor's mentoring program to the academic and social

development of the mentee's students (80%), the setting up of a personalized mentoring protocol for each school unit (79%), the setting up of a nationally agreed work protocol for mentoring after a debate (73%), the development of a national pilot guidance program by a working group with representatives from education executives (education and school principals, school counsellors) and working teachers (68%), and the geographic proximity of mentor-mentee (67%).

To a lesser extent, the teachers interviewed agree with the utilization of services and institutions (social services, universities, educational networks, etc.) in the mentoring program (48%), the utilization of internationally implemented programs and educational research findings for the mentor institution (43%) and mentor selection by the teacher directly concerned after effective mentor selection (35%). The high percentage of participants who disagreed with the choice of mentor by the headmaster of school unit (82%) is highly interesting.

4.5 Inductive Statistical Results

As far as the first hypothesis of the study is concerned, the relative analysis of variance revealed several statistically significant differences in the dependent variables. In order to study the effect of the individual age groups so that it can be determined whether the above hypothesis is confirmed, a Bonferroni post hoc test was performed. However, probably because the relationships were marginal, statistically significant differences were eliminated during the post-hoc testing, indicating non-significant differences between participants' age groups. Consequently, the hypothesis of a positive correlation among younger teachers' views on the mentor institution is not confirmed by the analysis of the results, leading to the conclusion that their perceptions on the necessity of mentoring are related to factors of their own professional practice rather than to their age.

As far as the second hypothesis of the study about a positive correlation between years of teaching education-experience and the views expressed is concerned, the One-Way ANOVA test showed no statistically significant differences for any of the variables examined. Therefore, the relevant hypothesis is not confirmed, as no significant differences are observed among the groups of teachers with different overall educational-teaching background. Therefore, their perceptions on the necessity of applying the mentor institution appear to relate to aspects of their teaching practice rather than to the total years of their teaching experience.

As far the hypothesis of a positive correlation between extra academic studies and teachers' views is concerned, initially statistically significant effects of extra academic studies on some of the variables of the study were found. In particular, statistically significant effects were noticed on the difficulty of new teachers ($p = 0.024$), the perception of the needs experienced by experienced teachers ($p = 0.003$) and the necessary functions of the mentor ($p = 0.004$). In the next step, these three statistically significant effects were further investigated through Bonferroni post-hoc control. However, post-hoc control did not show any statistically significant differences among the values of the individual variables. Consequently, the absence of statistically significant discrepancies also demonstrates the absence of the effect of additional studies in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of the interviewed teachers for the contribution of the mentor institution's to their professional development, leading to the rejection of this research hypothesis. Therefore, their perceptions for the necessity of mentoring are linked to factors in their professional practice rather than to individual differences in additional studies.

The fourth hypothesis concerning no difference of the teachers' views on the basis of employment relationship (permanent/non-permanent) is partially confirmed, since three of these variables have statistically significant effects. More specifically, statistically significant differences were noticed in the variables of difficulties for newcomers ($p = 0.042$), their perceptions of the needs and problems experienced by experienced

teachers ($p = 0.030$), and the perceived importance of psychological support for newcomers ($p = 0.008$), which indicate a more positive perception of the non-permanent on the need for counselling.

As far as the relationship between teachers' views and the school type in secondary education is concerned, the hypothesis of a non-significant effect is confirmed, since no statistically significant relationships concerning the school type were noticed for any of the variables examined. It is worth noting, however, that although the analysis of perceptions on the needs and problems experienced by experienced teachers showed some differences concerning the type of school, they did not exceed the limit of statistical significance and were therefore not considered significant. Finally, in relation to the last research hypothesis, positive correlations are shown that go beyond the limit of statistical significance for all the variables examined. The strongest of these relationships were noticed between the perceived necessity for psychological support and the most important factors of the necessity for implementation of the mentor institution ($r = 0.817$), the perceived importance of psychological and professional support ($r = 0.820$) and the perceived significance of professional and teaching support ($r = 0.879$).

5. Findings-Discussion

The results of the present study are directly related to the place where it was conducted. Findings from international research studies indicate that the need for reception, support and inspiration is greater for teachers residing in geographically isolated areas and may constitute a small community in which they can interact and seek support and guidance (Johnson & Daire, 2008, pp. 1–5; Quintana & Zambrano, 2014, pp. 629–636). Therefore, the context within which this research was conducted provides information on the perceptions and attitudes of secondary education teachers of an isolated island territory in Greece, which may be underrepresented in research practice and discarded in terms of its needs at the level of educational policy.

This empirical study demonstrates that secondary education teachers find it essential to implement the mentor institute as a supportive structure in the Greek education system, as both novice and experienced teachers daily experience discrepancies in the field of a fluid educational reality concerning their teaching and pedagogical work. It has also been shown that demographic factors, such as age, years of teaching experience, additional studies, and school type, do not have a significant impact on teachers' perceptions and attitudes about the contribution of the mentor institution to their reception, support and professional development. Therefore, it can be claimed that the perceived necessity for the implementation of the mentor institution does not differ significantly among teachers, but it is common among individual age groups. Therefore, the absence of statistically significant differences highlights the necessity for mentoring, demonstrating common supportive needs among teachers who may differ in their basic demographic characteristics.

The only differences noticed according to demographic parameters were those related to the participants' perceptions on the difficulties of newcomer teachers, the needs experienced by experienced teachers, and the importance of the mentor's psychological support to beginning teachers, where differences between permanent and non-permanent ones were noticed. The more positive perception of non-permanent teachers on the necessity of implementing the mentor institution is perhaps a reflection of their perceived inability to meet all the requirements of the educational process in a manner similar to that of permanent teachers, a weakness that can be covered by their most experienced colleagues.

Therefore, there is a need to integrate the mentor institution into the Greek educational system, as it is also demonstrated by the findings of this study in the context of a well-structured system of smooth integration of

beginning teachers (Macropoulou & Iordanidis, 2016, p. 167) and the activation of the inadequate structures for their professional support (Vergidis et al., 2010, pp. 11–27; Mavroides & Tipas, 2001, pp. 147–153; Wang & Odell, 2002, pp. 481–546).

Although the Greek State does not appear — at least in the present context — to pursue the adoption of mentorship as a realistic policy for supporting teachers' professional development, this research can be seen as complementing the empirical study and broadening the debate on the contribution of the mentorship institution to the reception, support and professional development of secondary education teachers, as it highlights their perceptions of the need for counselling guidance in a geographically isolated island area of Greece. Therefore, in response to the basic research question of the research, the high perceived necessity of the sample for counselling should concern the formal educational policy makers with a view to integrating school-based professional development into the school context, through support and guidance mechanisms, promoting the cooperative professional culture of school unit teachers (Vozaitis, 2013, pp. 15–44; Vozaitis, Ifanti & Vergides, 2016, pp. 32–54; Vozaitis & Ifanti, 2017, pp. 227–245).

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