



**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EDUCATIONAL CONTRACT
IN THE PROBLEM MANAGEMENT OF A SCHOOL CLASS WITH
DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: A CASE
STUDY IN A SCHOOL UNIT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING IN SECONDARY EDUCATION**

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Abstract:

This study aims to inform teachers about the importance of the educational contract in effective classroom management and its contribution to creating a supportive learning environment for students with special educational needs. Through a case study in a school unit of special education and training in secondary education, the implementation of the educational contract as an effective pedagogical practice of classroom management in the educational process is presented. The implementation of the educational contract in a class of students with disabilities and special educational needs showed multiple benefits in terms of preventing and dealing with students' behavior problems. The results of this empirical study can be used by educational scientists to improve the school climate not only in the classroom of students with special educational needs who attend special education and training units, but also in the classrooms of the school units of general education. In addition, innovative theoretical educational approaches to classroom management and activities can be highlighted that will contribute to the prevention and effective intervention in classroom management, promoting the active participation of students in the educational process and the promotion of learning.

Keywords: educational contract, school climate, rules, roles, classroom management, prevention, intervention, active participation, learning

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1. Introduction

According to the Social Systems Theory, the social system includes interdependent and mutually influencing systems such as those of the community, the social organization, and the school unit. The school unit is an open and dynamic system, which is influenced and influences other systems of the environment to which it belongs and in addition contains other subsystems such as students, teachers, parents' association, curriculum, teaching methods and techniques.

The interaction of the systems and the need to ensure the stability of the system and the orderly operation of the school unit, makes it necessary to establish rules and define clear roles by concluding the educational contract, which is also referred to as a learning or teaching or pedagogical or school contract.

The educational contract defines the commitment on both sides to respect the rights and obligations of the students towards the teacher and the rights and obligations of the teacher towards the students. Many teachers who have used the instructional contract as a classroom management tool report having few discipline problems in their classrooms (Kagan, 1992). While the educational contract is a basic concept in the educational process, however, it does not receive due attention from the teachers at the school units.

According to Brousseau (1986), the educational contract is the set of mutual obligations concerning the behaviors, the methods, the habits, and the roles of the teacher expected from the student and the student expected from the teacher. The educational contract defines boundaries and manages diversity and contradiction (Karakiza, 2007) ensuring the stability and security that students need. With the educational contract, the teacher and the students have the responsibility of managing the school context for which each becomes responsible towards the other in terms of behavior and actions at the level of the school class and the wider school environment.

The content of the educational contract includes the expectations regarding all aspects of the students' behavior in the school environment inside and outside the classroom (from the arrival at school to the departure of the students from the school), as well as their active participation in the educational process. The contract defines the rules and the consequences of breaking the rules. The educational contract is influenced by the behavior, perceptions and social stereotypes of teachers and students (Pajares, 1992).

The teacher, in collaboration with the students, draws up the educational contract at the beginning of the school year and in particular on the first day of his meeting with the students in the classroom (opening meeting) regardless of the general school rules that have been established and are applied for the orderly operation of the school unit. The essential involvement of students in the process of establishing the educational contract is necessary so that there is acceptance of the rules that lead to the internal self-regulation of student behavior (Edwards, 1997). Sergiovanni (1994), who has dealt with group dynamics, emphasizes that when members of a group participate in the formation

of norms, their degree of commitment increases. In addition, many studies have shown that when there is student participation in establishing the rules there is a significant improvement in student behavior (Jones & Jones, 1998). The educational contract allows for continuous support of students, helps prevent mistakes, forms a team climate in the classroom, develops empathy in students, cultivates positive relationships between the teacher and students and students among themselves, encourages the active participation of students, desirable behaviors are reinforced, undesirable ones are reduced, and it inspires the teacher's interest, trust and respect for the students (Brophy, 2004; Colvin et al., 1997; Pry & Sugai, 2002; Evertson & Emmer, 1982; Simonsen et al., 2008).

2. Literature Review

Many researchers recognize the educational contract as a particularly useful classroom management tool that contributes to improving the quality of educational work (Laplante, 1997). Establishing rules and procedures is an important aspect of classroom management, as it communicates to students the teacher's expectations of their behavior, provides stable structure to students, and helps them actively participate in learning activities (Brophy, 1998). In addition, it enhances students' school success (Evertson & Emery, 1982; Johnson et al., 1996) and provides a guideline for students to monitor and self-regulate their behavior, lending credibility to the teacher's work (Good & Brophy, 2000).

The reason for the creation of the concept of the educational contract was the answers given by students to a mathematical problem in a school in France in 1980. The students were given the following problem: "On a boat, there were 26 sheep and 10 goats. What is the captain's age?" In this problem 76 of the 97 students combining the numbers and facts answered about the captain's age as "36 years old". The students used the data of the problem, processed it with the tools at their disposal to lead to a "logical" answer. The specific answer given by the students is an example of the application of the educational contract, which is not due to a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of the students.

Brousseau, Sarrazy and Novotna in Lerman distinguish two components of the educational contract. The first concerns the contract of transfer, in which the teacher organizes his teaching and the activities that the students commit to responding to. The second concerns the formal school contract in which the students indicate the results of the teaching, and the teacher evaluates and provides the directions. At the same time, Hersant and Perrin-Glorian (2005) point out four dimensions in every teaching contract. The first two concern knowledge that must be taught and that must be mastered. The third dimension concerns the nature and characteristics of the continuous and evolving teaching situation and the fourth concerns responsibility and respect for knowledge on the part of students and teachers. These dimensions are related to each other. Furthermore, Hersant and Perrin-Glorian (2005) distinguish three different types of

contracts. The macro-contract, which is related to the wider purpose of teaching, the meso-contract, which concerns the resolution of activity and the micro-contract, which is located in some activity of a specific teaching unit.

An educational contract is a creative tool in the hands of the teacher and the students. The rules are a positive element of a school class (Matsangouras, 2001), which are observed throughout the school year and determine the framework of the student group. The rules define a large part of teacher-student relationships within the school environment, in a way that creates a positive school climate and supports the learning process. Areas where the teacher defines the rules of the contract include student behavior inside and outside the classroom, participation, and attendance, handing in and checking assignments, behavior toward the teacher and among students, respect of the spaces (classrooms, laboratories, libraries, offices, auxiliary spaces, use of materials and equipment, etc.), (Evertson & Emmer, 1996; Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Wong & Wong, 1998).

With the implementation of individual or group educational contracts, the expected behaviors and the consequences of not complying with them are determined in writing (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). The rules should be achievable and realistic and formulated with positive suggestions and clarity. For the effectiveness of the rules, it is necessary that they are co-shaped in the classroom with the substantial participation of both the teacher and the students and that they clearly describe the expected behaviors, the rewards and the consequences that will occur with the violation of the rules, (Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Simonsen et al., 2008), the date, names and signatures of students and teachers (Ministry of Education, 2014-2015:47). Group dynamics allow for changes in rules and redefinition of the educational contract during the school year, depending on the needs and expectations of the group, as new educational situations arise (Fuadiah et al., 2017) that require readjustment of rules. Consequences for violating the rules should also be provided for in the contract. This practice binds the student and is proof of the operation of the educational contract (Karakiza, et al., 2022).

The contract can be used in conjunction with the exchangeable pay system (Alberto & Troutman, 2006; Cooper et al., 2006). Furthermore, the teacher as a member of the class team, has a guiding role and commits to keeping the contract himself and should be able to take personal responsibility for wrong behavior in front of the student or students. (Karakiza, et al., 2022). Such an attitude is a pedagogical model of teaching responsibility and acts as an example for students, who value teachers highly, preserving their prestige and achieving their educational goals (Karakiza, et al., 2022). Thus, the teacher is on a continuous course of self-evaluation and self-improvement.

In order for the educational contract to be effective and fulfill its educational goals, it is important that the rules meet the following criteria (Ministry of Education, 2014-2015):

- 1) They are appointed at the beginning of the year at the opening meeting together with all the teachers of the class.

- 2) They are expressed in a positive and clear way, e.g., "Discuss with your group and answer this activity."
- 3) They are observable and measurable, e.g. "use your materials to make this design."
- 4) They are understandable by the students and care is needed to use the appropriate vocabulary according to the developmental level of the students in the class.
- 5) They are as many as students can remember and follow according to their developmental level (Brophy, 2010, Evertson & Emmer, 1982, Glasser, 1990, Larrivee, 1992).
- 6) The involvement of the students in the class in formulating the rules that concern them is necessary because only then can they apply them.

The steps that the teacher can follow to conclude the educational contract are:

- The formation of the layout of the class in a Π or circle, in order to favor communication and a group atmosphere.
- Reflection before the school year begins regarding expectations for the new school year, student behavior, individual and group work, use of spaces and materials, etc.
- Discussion of the teacher with the student group of the class at the beginning of the school year about their mutual expectations and needs.

An Activity Sheet can be used to better express expectations and formulate rules.

The classroom rules (educational contract) are signed by the students and the teacher or teachers who participated in the process of concluding the educational contract and are posted in a visible place in the room. The educational contract is reminded throughout the school year. For a better understanding and application of it, the involvement of parents and the cooperation between the school and the students' families is important. This cooperation is a vital factor in the education of the students.

2.1 The case of intervention in a class of students with disabilities and special educational needs

2.1.1 Students with special educational needs

According to article 3 of Law 3699 (Government Gazette 199), 2-10-2008 students with disabilities and special educational needs are considered those who for the whole or a certain period of their school life show significant learning difficulties due to: sensory, mental, cognitive, developmental problems, mental and neuropsychiatric disorders which, according to the interdisciplinary assessment, affect the process of school adaptation and learning.

Students with disabilities and special educational needs include those who present:

- 1) mental deficiency,
- 2) sensory visual impairments (blind, amblyopic with low vision), as well as sensory hearing impairments (deaf, hard of hearing),
- 3) motor disabilities,

- 4) chronic incurable diseases,
- 5) speech disorders,
- 6) specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyslexia, dispelling,
- 7) attention deficit syndrome with or without hyperactivity,
- 8) pervasive developmental disorders (autism spectrum),
- 9) mental disorders and multiple disabilities,
- 10) students with complex cognitive, emotional and social difficulties, delinquent behavior due to abuse, parental neglect and abandonment or due to domestic violence, belong to people with special educational needs.

Also, students with special educational needs are considered students who have one or more mental abilities and talents developed to a degree that far exceeds what is expected for their age group. The category of students with disabilities and special educational needs does not include students with low school performance that is causally linked to external factors, such as linguistic or cultural peculiarities.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Sample

The group that was the sample of the study, were seven (7) students of the 1st grade of High School, who attended a school unit of special education and training. Of the seven students, two were girls and five were boys, aged between 13 and 15 years. The students had disabilities and special educational needs, and in particular two students were diagnosed with Down syndrome, three with moderate mental retardation and two with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The students had relatively good emotional and cognitive potential and were able to process information and collaborate according to their developmental level.

3.2 Goals

The goals of the intervention were:

- The development of emotional skills (recognition, understanding and management of emotions).
- The development of social skills (communication, interaction, initiative, cooperation, demarcation with the rules of social behavior, reciprocity, teamwork).
- The orderly functioning of the school classroom and support of learning.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The problem of intervention

The need for the intervention arose due to the particular difficulties in the behavior of the students that manifested both during the teaching and during the breaks. The problems reported by the teachers two months after the start of the school year were: the "absence of demarcation of the students", the "verbal and physical aggression between the students in the class and with other students during the breaks and also towards the teachers", the "constant tension", 'yelling', 'outbursts of anger', 'teasing students from other classes and teachers', 'eating whenever they wanted', 'wandering around the classroom aimlessly during class' or 'leaving the classroom'. This behavior of the students had particularly troubled the teachers and they asked for intervention to improve the situation.

4.2 The design of the intervention

To plan the intervention, a pedagogical meeting was held with the involved teachers of the specific department. The discussion focused mainly on the difficulties faced by the teachers and on the way they had so far managed the difficulties in their classroom.

The teachers mentioned that they had "tried all the practical observations, punishments, reprimands and intervention of the principal, 'to no avail'". Some teachers stated that they set the rules themselves, which they posted but students did not follow. One teacher reported that every time she entered the classroom she wrote the rules on the board, which she reminded throughout the lesson and thus managed to keep the group of students in the classroom in some balance. All the teachers agreed that this situation created intense anxiety, frustration, failure of their teaching goals and a negative mood to teach in the specific department.

The disclosure of the implementation of the conclusion of the educational contract did not satisfy the teachers, most of whom stated that they were aware of it as a practice but questioned its effectiveness and were unaware of it. Many spoke disparagingly of its operation, while some others stated that they did not know the methodology of its implementation and some others expressed their wonder that the students of the particular section with disabilities and special educational needs are not able to formulate rules and understand the concept of educational contract. However, the teachers accepted with many reservations the intervention in the classroom and the conclusion of the educational contract with their students.

When designing the intervention, the characteristics of students with disabilities and special educational needs regarding their age, their mental and emotional state, and their difficulties in concentration and attention were taken into account. In addition, educational goals and teachers' expectations for effective problem-solving were taken into account.

4.3 The implementation of the educational contract: The implementation steps

The implementation of the educational contract took place two months after the start of classes, while it should have been established during the first hours of the opening meeting after getting to know the students and exploring their expectations for the new school year.

During the implementation of the intervention, importance was given to the student-centered arrangement of the room in P, in order to facilitate the communication and interaction of the students with the teacher and the cooperation of the students with each other.

Afterwards, the students were given the opportunity to get to know each other, although the school year had already started, through a game mentioning their names and hobbies in order for the students to communicate and get to know each other better. Then they were given a Sheet with an Activity, which was also written on the board with the following questions:

- "Why do I come to school?"
- "How would I like my class group to work at school?"
- The students with disabilities and special educational needs cooperated with each other in an impressive way and provided very rich material with a variety of rules covering all aspects of their school life.
- Students' responses to the first question, "Why do I come to school?" it was:
- "We come to school to learn: 'letters', 'numbers', 'language', 'things', 'computers', 'artistic', 'gym', 'physical therapy', 'kindness', 'respect'.

In the second question, "How would I like my class group to work at school?", the students' responses were:

- "When the bell rings let's go to class for the lesson."
- "Don't disturb other children and their prams".
- "During the lesson, we don't get up from our desk"
- "When we finish from school, we enter the school bus"
- "When the bell rings we go out for break"
- "We don't speak badly of our teachers and classmates"
- "We raise our hand to speak"
- "We speak politely to our teachers and classmates."
- "I raise my hand to speak and do not interrupt my classmate when he is speaking."
- "During the lesson, I don't get up from the desk."
- "When the bell rings, I go outside for break."
- "During the long break I go out to eat. If I don't go out, I leave my desk clean."
- "I go to the bathroom during breaks."
- "When I finish from school, I go to the school bus."
- "I apply all the above rules."

The teacher also quoted his own opinions regarding the students' behavior and his own attitude. All opinions were recorded and after discussion in class, the rules of the educational contract were established.

Because it is important that the rules are few, clear, simple, and comprehensive, in collaboration with the students they were merged in the first person, so that there is immediacy, and they can remember and apply them.

Thus, the following ten rules were established:

- 1) When the bell rings I enter the classroom for class.
- 2) I speak politely to my teachers and classmates.
- 3) I raise my hand to speak and do not interrupt my classmate when he is speaking.
- 4) During the lesson I sit at my desk.
- 5) When the bell rings, I go outside for the break.
- 6) During the long break I go out to eat. If I don't go out, I leave my desk clean.
- 7) I look out for other children and their prams.
- 8) I go to the bathroom during breaks.
- 9) When I finish school, I enter the school bus.
- 10) I apply all the above rules.

Then, following the cooperation of the teacher with the students, the consequences of the possible violation of the rules of the educational contract were determined. The consequences were "sorry" and "inform the principal and their parents." The Classroom Rules were signed by the students and their teachers and became the Classroom Educational Contract for the school year. The contract was distributed to all students and posted up in a prominent place in the classroom for constant reminders and compliance. At the same time, in the context of the school's cooperation with the family, the parents of the students of the specific class were informed by phone, so that they could help from their side in achieving the goals of the educational contract.

5. Recommendations

A limitation of the research is that the intervention was carried out in a group of students with disabilities and special educational needs who were studying in the 1st grade of a high school in a school unit for special education and training. Another limitation is the age group of the students, the gender and the heterogeneity of the group that presents various difficulties (Down syndrome, moderate mental retardation, and ASD). It is suggested for future research to investigate these sections.

6. Conclusion

In the present study, an attempt was made to approach the concept and application of the educational contract through a case study of students with disabilities and special educational needs. The results of the intervention of the educational contract in the class

group of students with disabilities and special educational needs confirmed the results of the study of Jones & Jones, (1998), who argued that when there is the participation of students in establishing the rules there is significantly improving student behavior. It has been found that students accurately formulate the rules they set for the functioning of their class group both inside and outside the classroom and even sometimes set stricter rules than teachers (Cheung, 2002). Students from the first day of the implementation of the educational contract began to respect and follow the rules. Often, some students would remind the teachers themselves of the rules when they entered the classroom to teach their lesson and would often try to bring a student who had broken the rules back into the classroom.

Other important factors shaping the school framework, apart from the educational contract, were the arrangement of the classroom (Borich, 2007) so that students sit in a P-shape and the adoption of the method of cooperative teaching in micro-groups (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986; Evertson & Poole, 2008). The layout of the class in a P, facilitates communication and interaction with the teacher and cooperation between students, creates a sense of equality among students and encourages the expression of opinions and ideas, while at the same time contributing to the development of a spirit of cooperation among its members' student group (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986). The learner-centred layout of the classroom particularly helps students with disabilities and special educational needs, as they face difficulties in concentration and attention and may exhibit behavioral problems (Evertson & Poole, 2008).

The collaboration between school and family (Miller, 2002; Trilianos, 2008; Papatthemelis, 2005; Papatthemelis, 2000) is a very important factor in the success of the application of the educational contract technique, as it signals that there is a common fixed pedagogical guideline in terms of determining of the acceptable limits of social behavior, while at the same time it contributes to the cultivation of stable values and the development of students' life skills that help them in their socio-emotional development in general in life.

Classroom teachers who used the educational contract reported being "satisfied", reporting that they had few behavioral problems to deal with. This finding is confirmed by the results of a study by Kagan (1992), who suggests teachers the use of the educational contract to reduce discipline problems in their classrooms. The teachers consider the educational contract to be effective, because they found in practice that the students take individual and collective responsibility for creating and following the rules, which pass from the teacher to the students themselves. The students appreciate the space and time given to them by the teacher and assume a responsible and creative role within the group. Thus, a relationship of trust is created between teacher and students. A basic condition for the effectiveness of the educational contract is for teachers to believe in it and consistently follow its implementation methodology.

It is important to note that it is useful for the educational contract to be established with all the teaching teachers of the class by department so that there is no confusion with

many contracts that will result in the inability of the students to comply with it. This project is not always possible, as not all teachers are facilitated in terms of hours, but in addition, there is the risk of there being many and opposing opinions that can lead to an impasse. However, the goal is to have a contract for each department and in this effort, the teachers need support, who gradually as they become familiar can adapt it to their own personal style and the particular characteristics of each target student group, they are called upon to teach.

The present study could be a trigger for further future investigations, which could focus their interest on groups of general education students with students of typical development so that there is the possibility of a comparative study of the results of the classroom management intervention of students with disabilities and special educational needs. The study could also be extended to homogeneous groups of students presenting sensory, mental, cognitive and developmental difficulties, as well as mental and neuropsychiatric disorders and studied in relation to the age and gender of the students. Also, it would be interesting to study the obstacles to school-family cooperation in relation to the implementation and implementation of the educational contract.

In conclusion, it is concluded that the rules governing the educational contract reflect the constant effort to regulate student-teacher relationships and student expectations regarding the learning subject, while at the same time developing the social skills of cooperation, teamwork, flexibility, communication, of solidarity, responsibility, participation, critical thinking, reciprocity and mutual acceptance ensuring a positive psychological school climate, stability and safety inside and outside the classroom.

Funding Statement

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Dr. Gianna Voukelatou is a lecturer at the "Nicosia" University of Cyprus and teaches the course "Special Education: Research and Contemporary Trends". She has long experience as a Psychologist and Social Worker in the Local Government, the Region of Attica and the Special Education and Education Units in the Primary and Secondary Education of the Ministry of Education. She deals with adult education and vocational training and was the director of a Public Vocational Training Institute (D.IEK) and a Second Chance School. Her research interests focus on the social and emotional development of children and adolescents, special education and training, school crisis management, interpersonal relationships, family counseling and adult education. She has participated as a coordinator and as a member of interdisciplinary teams in research

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