MENTORING IN KINDERGARTENS. EXPLORING THE VIEWS OF KINDERGARTEN PRINCIPALS ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR AND THE STRATEGIES FOLLOWED IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF NEWLY APPOINTED TEACHERS

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Abstract: *This study aims to investigate the views of kindergarten principals regarding the characteristics of an effective mentor and the strategies followed in the integration process of newly appointed teachers. By conducting qualitative research, the views on this topic of 15 kindergarten principals were explored using the research tool of semi-structured interviews. From the interviews' processing, it emerged that kindergarten heads attribute to the effective mentor the characteristics of willingness, developed communication skills, and a positive attitude towards the mentored. In contrast, the training of mentors is considered a necessary condition for the effective performance of their role. In the process of smooth adaptation and integration of newly appointed teachers according to kindergarten supervisors, as strategies followed, the building of a relationship of trust and respect between mentor and mentee, the utilization of the mentor's communication skills, as well as the good mood and the time that an effective mentor devotes to the mentoring process in conjunction with the support of the institution by the school contribute to the process.*

Introduction

Nowadays, mentoring is a practice that has been increasingly used at all levels of education, from pre-school to higher education. For newly appointed teachers in kindergartens in particular, mentoring can be particularly useful, and if implemented effectively can offer guidance and support on many levels.

More specifically, in the phase of integration into the new working environment, mentoring can help newly appointed teachers to adapt smoothly to everyday life, the rules of operation, and the school's demands. In addition, as preschool education requires specific knowledge and skills, through mentoring, newly qualified teachers can be supported in managing professional difficulties and supported in effective strategies for classroom management, cultivating children's behavior, and promoting learning through play, which are key elements of preschool education. Mentoring can also assist in improving the teaching practices of newly qualified teachers by supporting them in creating learning environments that focus on children's needs, interests, and abilities, fostering natural curiosity and learning through exploration.

The first period in pre-school education in particular can be stressful for newly appointed teachers, as they are often called upon to deal with responsibilities, challenges, and various individual problems that arise in the daily school routine. In this context, an effective mentor can support by providing encouragement and assistance in overcoming difficulties, limiting the emotional and professional attrition of newly appointed teachers.

Moreover, mentoring can also enhance the job satisfaction of newly qualified teachers and encourage their professional development by updating their knowledge and improving the quality of their skills. Another important dimension in preschool education is communication with the parents of young learners, which is key to creating a cooperative teacher-parent framework. An effective mentor can help newly qualified teachers develop communication skills and guide them in fostering trust and collaboration with parents.

Characteristics and Skills of an Effective Mentor

In international literature, a plethora of attributes is attributed to the mentor, describing him or her as a 'guide', 'teacher', 'teacher', 'role model', 'supervisor', 'guide', 'facilitator', 'facilitator', 'supporter' (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1992). Others describe him as a "mentor" who guides his younger colleagues by utilizing his wisdom and patience (Pappa & Iordanidis, 2017), while Androussou & Tsafos (2013) attribute the term "father figure" to him. According to Salvaras

(2013), the mentor is a role model for the mentee, as he or she educates, supports, and grants knowledge. Gardiner (2010) describes him as a "critical friend", Lopez-Real & Kwan (2005) as a "trusted friend", and Ehrich & Hansford (1999) as a "significant other".

Jenkins (2013) reports that Clutterbuck (2004:53-54) in the first edition of his book Everyone Needs a Mentor introduced the acronym of the word MENTOR to convey his characteristic traits. Thus, a mentor:

- Manages the relationship
- Encourages
- Nurtures
- Teaches
- Offers mutual respect
- Responds to the mentee's needs.

Given that mentors are adult educators, it is considered a prerequisite that they are educated in relevant disciplines, trained in the principles of adult education, and know the teaching methodology they adopt to meet their professional needs (Bullough, 2012). Georgopoulou (2017) and McDonald & Flint (2011) state that within the matrix of necessary knowledge of mentors is knowledge of psychology and sociology.

Also, knowledge of the delineation of their role as mentors is considered essential for mentoring to take place so that they maintain their energy levels if mentors seek a dependent relationship with them (Ramani, Gruppen & Kachur, 2006).

Larson (2009) further states that the recognition of the mentor's strengths and weaknesses in a self-awareness context is a prerequisite for effective mentoring as well as a determinant of the mentor's own professional development. At the same time, Larson (2009) mentions willingness as both a prerequisite and a key characteristic of an effective mentor.

The positive attitude of the mentor towards each mentee individual is interpreted by the supportive function of mentoring (Koutsoukos, 2021). According to Rogers (2001, cited in Koutsoukos, 2021), both the full and individualized acceptance of the mentee by the mentor and the respect for the right of the mentored person to settle the issues concerning him/her are considered a prerequisite.

Moreover, in terms of skills, communication skills are considered a required characteristic of the mentor (Koutsoukos, 2021; Good, Halpin & Halpin, 2000; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003), while Ehrich et al. (2004) refer to the mentor's essential skill of being able to express himself/herself in a clear and understandable context. McLean (2004) refers to the mentor's communication skills focusing on the skill of active listening while considering the ability to advise as a prerequisite of effective mentoring. Kapachtsi (2020) argues that the

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communication skills of the mentor are the lever of psychological support for the mentee and the prerequisite for the development of a meaningful relationship between the members involved. Pitney & Ehlers (2004) even point out the value of humor as an asset credited to the mentor's communication skills.

According to Salvaras (2013), to cope with the supportive function of his role, the mentor must have (a) an open mind that will distance him/her from any idea of bias; (b) sensitivity to manage the possible change in the mentors' behavior; (c) empathy to understand how the mentors feel by dealing with the situation from their perspective; (d) authenticity that will help him/her to be his/her authentic self; and (e) non-authoritarianism in order not to hinder the mentor's effort.

Berliner (2001) also states that a prerequisite for smooth cooperation between mentor and mentee is the creation of a trustful climate and the acceptance of the mentee's achievements, while Tickle (2001) refers to the characteristics of honesty and trustworthiness. Regarding the mentor's teaching skills, Kokkos (2005) states that the mentor is the mediator of knowledge between himself and the mentee to facilitate the learning experience, while Matthews (2015) and Koutsoukos (2021) argue that the mentor's role is linked to the teaching of the teachers themselves.

Another area of skills considered important for the mentor is reflection skills (Bell, 2001). Reflection applies to almost the entire mentoring process as it can refer to events that occur during, after, or during the planning of the action (Zhu, 2011). Bell & Mladenovic (2013) linked the mentor's experience to the reflective process during mentoring. Kioulanis, Giamalis, Dimitrakis & Valkanos (2016) showed that if reflection during mentoring is enhanced by using similar techniques, it can assist in the reflective learning process.

The emotional intelligence of the mentor is also considered a key characteristic of effective mentoring (Cherniss, 2007; Rowley, 1999). Illeris (2016) states that the emotional intelligence of the mentor is that which allows the mentor to understand the emotions of the mentees and manage them in a way that is appropriate in terms of facilitating the mentoring process, but at the same time, it is also that which allows the mentor to regulate their own emotions for the benefit of the mentoring relationship. It is also worth mentioning the meaningful nature of participatory learning since its connection with lifelong learning favors the conditions of personal and professional development of the members involved (Koutsoukos, 2021; Young et al., 2004).

However, Benson (2002) points out that many mentors are not born with the skills required for the mentor's role and their participation in

mentoring programs would be considered beneficial and constructive. Connor et al. (2000), argue that these training programs would be more effective if they used a combination of training strategies that allowed the prospective mentors to participate in practical exercises, such as watching video scenarios and/or role-playing. Achinstein, & Davis (2014) and Fokiene et al. (2013) argue concerning the issue of mentor training that it should universally address the matrix of role dimensions.

The same reasoning is followed by Ramani et al. (2006), who point out that mentors need training and remuneration to be able to cope effectively with the tasks of their role. At the same time, they emphasize the need for older and more experienced mentors to also participate in mentoring programs as mentors at this time, as they may wish to change career orientation or bring about career changes while already holding senior positions in the organizations in which they work. Similar findings are reported in the research by Petrovska et al. (2018), which highlights the need for financial incentives for educational mentors. Newly appointed teachers, for their part, demand more frequent and more mentoring presence in classrooms. Moreover, mentors who participate in training programs and receive consistent support feel increased self-esteem, act innovatively, and behave as leaders (Thornton, 2014).

Mentoring Strategies and Newly Appointed Teachers
It is a common assumption that it is difficult for newly appointed teachers to integrate into the classroom, as their university education is mostly based on theoretical foundations, which is an obstacle in the first years of their professional careers. What is observed during this period is that high levels of stress and uncertainty occupy them as they make an intense effort to meet the matrix of responsibilities assigned to them (Marable & Raimondi, 2007).

The role of the mentor is crucial as it contributes to improving human resources (Valasi, 2015). More specifically, concerning newly appointed teachers, the mentor has an advisory role in dealing with potential problems (Hobson et al., 2009 · Marable & Raimondi, 2007 Achinstein & Athanases,2005) during the new apprentice's adaptation and integration into the school unit, helping to stimulate the new apprentice's self-confidence and professional development (Langdon, 2011; Trikas & Kasimatis, 2017).

According to Achinstein & Davis (2014) and Kutsyuruba et al. (2019), the mentoring strategies followed in terms of smooth adjustment and integration of the newly qualified are as follows:

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Networking with other new appointees/mentors/teachers in the organization
Reflection practices through oral or written exchanges
Design and implementation of lessons in a collaborative context and their evaluation
Providing support regarding students' assessment
Creating groups to discover new ideas, reflect and improve educational practices
Exchange of views related to the educational process
Creation of groups to study and exchange contemporary research articles on teaching and learning issues.
Video recording of teachings.
Relationship-building techniques and the development of skills related to active listening, understanding, verbal and non-verbal communication, focusing on achievements, and the process of clear target setting.
The mentor according to Achinstein & Athanases (2005) utilizes a set of techniques such as feedback, observation, engaging the mentee in discussions and reflection processes, model teaching, and co-teaching to help the newly appointed teacher to improve his/her teaching practices, overcome the anxiety and feelings of insecurity that plague them at the beginning of their careers and to adapt their professional expectations to the culture of the school organization they serve.
The conditions that need to be met for the smooth adaptation and integration of new appointees in the school unit according to Kokki (1997 cited in Alabi et al. 2017) are the following: a) Selection and training of individuals to assume the role of mentor, b) mentor-mentee compatibility c) setting goals and expectations from the mentoring process d) establishing mentoring programs.
Fletcher & Strong (2009) cite confidentiality between the parties involved, building a relationship of mutual trust, availability of time, compatibility of the personalities involved, and a mutually agreed and structured mentoring framework as prerequisites for an effective mentoring relationship.
According to research by Makropoulou & Iordanidis (2016), the conditions that must be taken into account for the mentoring project to have qualitative characteristics are the strict criteria for the selection of mentors, their necessary training, the dedication of sufficient time to the mentoring process as well as the support of the mentoring institution within the school community.
Athanasoula-Reppa (2017) argues that the conditions considered necessary for an effective mentoring relationship are the support of the mentoring institution by the school, the mentor-mentee match, the

willingness of the mentor to take on the responsibility of professional support and initiation of the newcomer as well as the willingness of the newcomer to be mentored. Further prerequisites are the building of a cooperative relationship between the mentor and the newcomer, the use of mentoring strategies, and the education/training of the mentor.

Research Methodology
This research aimed to investigate the perceptions of kindergarten principals of the regional unit of Thessaloniki regarding the outline of the dimensions of the profile of an effective mentor and the strategies followed in the integration process of newly appointed teachers.
The research questions to which the survey sought answers are the following:
What are the views of kindergarten principals regarding the personal characteristics, knowledge, and skills of an effective mentor?
What are the kindergarten principals' views regarding the strategies followed by the mentor in terms of smooth adaptation and integration of the newly appointed teachers in the educational organization?
For the needs of the present research, a sample of 15 kindergarten principals of the regional unit of Thessaloniki was selected. The sampling, for practical reasons of facilitating the research process, was done without probability because the participants in the survey met the required characteristics, and their selection was done for reasons of easy access and willingness of these kindergarten principals to participate in the research. Consequently, the survey sample can be described as a convenience sample (Creswell, 2011). In particular, the snowball technique was followed as the sample was formed by the process of accumulation (Isari & Pourkos, 2015).
For data collection, the qualitative research method was chosen as it was considered more effective for the situation as it provided the opportunity to capture the views in a free context, while at the same time, providing the opportunity to interpret and deepen the perceptions of the participants (Tsiolis, 2014). The semi-structured interview was chosen as a research tool due to its flexible nature and the possibility of deepening the issues under investigation (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). To create the interview guide, questions were formulated which were based on previous, related research. In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely using the Google Meet platform, each lasting approximately 20-30 minutes. The interviews were conducted between November and December 2023 and the qualitative content analysis method was used to process the data, specifically thematic analysis. The interview questions were sorted according to the research questions.

Results
Profile of Participating Kindergarten Principals
The sample consisted of 15 kindergarten principals in the regional unit of Thessaloniki. The participants were all women and as shown in Table 1 regarding the age distribution of the participants during the research, the average age was 51.2 years.
Regarding the educational level of the participants, out of the total of 15 kindergarten heads, 9 of them (60%) had a postgraduate degree and 6 of them (40%) had a university degree. Regarding the years of teaching experience, the average was 23.5 years. Regarding the participants' administrative experience, the average number of years of administrative experience is 12.1 years (see Table1)

Table 1. Profile of interview Participants

	Age	Level of Studies	Teaching experience (years)	Administrative experience (years)
S1	56	University degree	25	15
S2	57	University degree	29	15
S3	40	Postgraduate degree	15	4
S4	55	University degree	31	29
S5	38	Postgraduate degree	12	3
S6	56	Postgraduate degree	26	18
S7	45	Postgraduate degree	21	4
S8	39	Postgraduate degree	10	4
S9	60	University degree	37	20
S10	56	University degree	23	17
S11	50	Postgraduate degree	18	14
S12	55	Postgraduate degree	28	12
S13	50	Postgraduate degree	25	9
S14	59	University degree	25	2
S15	52	Postgraduate degree	28	16
Average (years)	51,2	6 University Degree 9 Postgraduate Degree	23,5	12,1

Effective Mentor's Profile
The majority of the participants (100%) as demonstrated in Table 2 indicate that mentor training is considered an essential characteristic to form the profile of an effective mentor, while many responses regarding the characteristics of an effective mentor converge on the characteristic of willingness, communication skills and positive attitude of the mentor towards the mentee (see Table 2)

Table 2. Characteristics of an Effective Mentor

Characteristics of an Effective Mentor	Number of Answers	Percentage
Training	15/15	100%
Willingness	15/15	100%
Communication skills	13/15	86,6%
Positive attitude towards mentees	11/15	73,3%

Strategies Followed for the Smooth Adaptation and Integration of Newly Appointed Teachers

The responses of the participants as to the strategies to be followed by the effective mentor concerning the smooth adjustment and integration of the newly appointed teacher in the educational organization as reflected in Table 3 converge on the formation of a climate of trust and mutual respect between the mentor and the mentee (Spooner Lane, 2017; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Typical responses mention that "an effective mentor must have a trusting relationship with the mentee" or "Surely a mentor must approach the newcomer and create a sense of trust" or "... the first and key stage to start from is to gain the trust of the colleague"

The use of communication skills on the part of the mentor, flexibility, and "openness" (Achinstein & Davis, 2014; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019) are mentioned by all participants (100%) as strategies used by the effective mentor to achieve a smooth adjustment of the newly appointed teacher. Typical responses are "The mentor should be very communicative and open to listen to so different issues and concerns that exist in the classroom" or "...I believe that the mentor should be communicative, able to direct the newcomer in the teaching task" (see Table 3)

Table 3. Adaptation Strategies Followed by New Teachers

Adaption Strategies	Number of Answers	Percentages
Building a Climate of Trust and mutual Respect	10/15	66,6%
Use of communication Skills	15/15	100%

The willingness and positive attitude of the mentor as well as the dedication of the mentor's time to the newly appointed (Fletcher & Strong, 2009 Kapachtsi & Papavassiliou, 2018), combined with the release from administrative or pedagogical duties through the support

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of the school in the institution (Athanasoula-Repa, 2017) (Table 4) (Table 4) are, according to the majority of the participants, key prerequisites for effective mentoring regarding the smooth adaptation of the new appointee to the educational organization (see Table 4)

Table 4 Effective Mentoring Conditions for New Techers

Conditions for adaptation of new teachers	Number of answers	Percentage
Willingness/Positive mentor Attitude	15/15	100%
Devotion of mentoring Time	15/15	100%
Exemption from administrative/educational Duties	15/15	100%

Typical answers are: "Mood is the alpha and omega" or "If there is a mood of cooperation and generally there is a good mood about how we can all work together in a spirit of cooperation and harmony and calm, everything will go well" or "to have the goodwill and the mood and this is not a process that is done in haste but voluntarily. Only in this way can it be effective" or "First of all, the mentor must devote time to the mentee" or "Have time first of all. I mean, I don't know how in a public school, when there is a full-time schedule, he can mentor at the same time if he is in a different class. To have support from the principal of the school ...Support to whom? To the mentor! So that he can fulfill his role. And for me, there should first be support from the state. Someone who takes on a mentor should have some exemption from classes, from teaching hours to be able to fulfill this role as well. Because otherwise, the colleague is overloaded, and it's not just that he's overloaded, it's that he's going to find the time to do all this if he has the full-time hours?"

Discussion-Conclusions
Nowadays, mentoring is increasingly used in all levels of education, including pre-school education. Especially for newly appointed teachers, mentoring can be a useful tool for their adaptation and smooth functioning in the new workplace. Depending on the

specificities of each situation, mentoring can help to smooth the transition of newly qualified teachers from theory to practice, facilitating their integration into the demanding field of pre-school education and contributing to their professional development.

Based on the results, kindergarten principals attribute to the effective mentor the characteristics of willingness, and developed communication skills. This finding agrees with the findings of the studies of Koutsoukos (2021), Kapachtsi (2020), Branch (2016) Terrion & Leonard (2007), Good, Halpin & Halpin (2000), and Mee-Lee & Bush (2003) in which good communication is central to the ranking of the characteristics of the effective mentor. The respondent's views are interpreted if we consider that based on the literature, the willingness and enthusiasm of the mentor is a prerequisite of a mentoring relationship (Larson, 2009) and help the mentor to maintain increased energy levels in difficult situations (Ehrich et al., 2004).

Kindergarten principals' perceptions regarding mentor communication skills can be interpreted if we consider that effective mentors create conditions of comfort in communication (Lawson, 1989), while poor mentoring outcomes are associated with low-quality communication (McLean, 2004). An interesting finding regarding the characteristics of an effective mentor is the positive attitude of the mentor toward the mentee (Rogers, 2001 cited in Koutsoukos, 2021). However, findings from several studies indicate that mentors demonstrate low tolerance for failure due to the excessive expectations they are driven by regarding their mentees' achievements (Johnson & Cervero, 2004; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). This view of the interviewees can be interpreted if we take into account that the mentor has to accept the mentee as well as show respect for the mentee's right to arrange everything that concerns him/her in an orderly manner (Rogers, 2001, cited in Koutsoukos, 2021).

The perceptions of most kindergarten principals converge on the view that the training of mentors is considered necessary (Ramani et al., 2006 · Bullough, 2012 · Achinstein & Davis, 2014; Fokiene et al., 2013) due to both the ever-changing educational and social environment and as a factor of effective performance of their role (Benson, 2002; Koutsoukos, 2021).

According to the perceptions of kindergarten supervisors regarding the strategies followed by the effective mentor in terms of the smooth adaptation and integration of newly appointed teachers in the educational organization, the findings of the research converge on the formation of a climate of trust and mutual respect (Spooner Lane, 2017; Kutsyuruba et al., 2019), while a significant portion of kindergarten supervisors mention the utilization of the mentor's

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communication skills. These findings are corroborated by findings from similar studies such as Kutsyuruba et al. (2019) and Achinstein & Davis (2014). The findings of the study regarding the conditions that need to be met for the mentor to effectively fulfill his/her role in terms of smooth adjustment and integration of the newcomer into the educational organization, mention the willingness and positive attitude of the mentor towards the mentee (Athanasoula-Repa, 2017) as well as the dedication of the mentor's time (Kapachtsi & Papavasiliou,2018; Fletcher & Strong, 2009) in combination with the school's support to the institution (Athanasoula-Repa, 2017).

All the above opinions of the research participants regarding the strategies followed and the conditions that contribute to the smooth adaptation of the newcomers to the educational organization can be interpreted if we take into account the individual roles of the mentor including characteristics and functions related to both emotional and instrumental support of the mentored (Matthews, 2015).

The present study addresses an issue that has not been the subject of extensive scholarly research in the past, thus contributing to enriching the relevant literature. In terms of the generalizability of the findings of the study, there are limitations arising from the use of purposive sampling, but careful sample selection makes the results usable across a wider population. Moreover, the findings of this research can be complemented by future research attempts that will include: (a) quantitative and qualitative measurements in kindergarten principals to make the sample more representative both in terms of scope and geographical area; (b) conducting a mixed survey of both kindergarten principals and newly appointed teachers; (c) conducting a field survey using the observation method in kindergarten principals; and finally (d) repeating a qualitative survey only in private kindergarten principals.

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