Parents as students: seeking for the balance

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The purpose of this study was to examine the potential impact of the conflict between work, family and school on absenteeism from high-school, and the role academic motivation might have, for non-traditional students in Cyprus. To this end, a mixed-method research was conducted. The main research tools were the structured interview with former and current non-traditional high-school students with dropout behavior and a structured questionnaire for the registered students of a second chance school in Cyprus. Thematic analysis of the interview data indicated that being unable to respond effectively to the complex role of simultaneously being a parent, an employee and a student had resulted to increased absenteeism and dropout. Statistical analysis confirmed the above view, since absenteeism had a positive correlation with working hours and having children. Moreover, it was found that almost half of the participants experienced work-family-school conflict. Intention to dropout was higher for students that experienced work-family-school conflict compared to those who did not. It is noteworthy that academic motivation could predict intention to dropout. In conclusion, it seems that being a parent, a worker and a student is not an easy job, since it may result to work-family-school conflict and school dropout. However academic motivation may mediate the above relationship, increasing the likelihood of non-traditional students graduating from high-school.

Keywords: parents, work-family-school conflict, non-traditional students, second chance high-schools, Cyprus.

Introduction

Despite the considerable number of non-traditional students re-enrolling at high-school for returned adults in Cyprus, i.e. Esperino[1] school , the high dropout rate 20% is a growing concern (Esperino of Nicosia, 2019). Since typically non-traditional students have multiple roles and conflicting responsibilities from the different domains, i.e. work, family and school (Kirby, Biever, Martinez & Gomez, 2004), questions arise regarding the actual factors, which are related to dropout behavior within this population. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine the potential impact of the conflict between work, family and school on absenteeism from Esperino and dropout intention, and the role academic motivation might have, for non-traditional students in Cyprus.

The context of the study

Situated at the northeast end of the Mediterranean basin, Cyprus is an island with a population of almost a million of inhabitants and an area of 9251 square kilometers, which consists of five districts, i.e. Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Paphos and Ammochostos. Since in Cyprus a high-school degree is a prerequisite for tertiary education and governmental jobs, in 1970, Esperino schools were founded in each district of Cyprus, in order to offer full-time high-school degree completion programs for working adults. Cypriot Esperino schools are night high-schools for non-traditional students. According to Kirby et al. (2004), non-traditional students may be defined as adults with jobs and families who return to school after a discernable break in their educational career, aiming to stay current in their

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[1] "Esperino" is a Greek word meaning "happening during the evening". According to the culture and the educational system in Cyprus, high-schools operating at evenings, i.e. Esperino schools, are only for working adults (Cyprus Parliament, 2019).

field or to acquire essential knowledge and skills through formal education.

Even though a high-school degree is awarded only after the completion of the sixth grade of a Cypriot Esperino school, non-traditional students can enroll at any grade depending on their last school degree. Hence, obligatory school attendance may range from one to six years. While the first three classes are standard, from fourth to sixth class non-traditional Esperino students may choose among four study directions, i.e. Classical Studies, Applied Sciences, Economic Studies and Services (Cyprus Parliament, 2019). Classes at Esperino school begin at 18.00 and finish at 21.30, with five sessions every day, each one lasting between 35 to 40 minutes.

The school year begins around the 10th of September and ends around 10th of May, with two weeks Christmas vacation in December and two weeks Easter vacation in April. Hence, students spend approximately 700 periods at school for the whole year (between 50 to 100 periods per month). Students may be absent from class for maximum 225 periods for the whole year, without any consequences. In average, students may be absent for 30 periods per month. When the total number of absences per year is over 250, students cannot continue to the next class. Since students of Esperino schools are usually adults with work and family, they often experience work-family-school conflict.

Work-family-school conflict

Dealing with multiple roles (i.e. being a parent-employee-student) may increase confidence and self-esteem in adult students (Sweet & Moen, 2007). In addition, research findings support that some non-traditional students experience less boredom, and academic and test-related stress, greater academic satisfaction and self-respect, and fewer health problems, while they attend class more consistently than traditional students (Sweet & Moen, 2007). Nonetheless, for many non-traditional students, the required amount of time and energy to meet the increased demands of all domains and fulfil mutually incompatible roles frequently creates imbalance. Hence, it appears that re-entering school may become simultaneously a life enhancing activity and a major stress source (Sweet & Moen, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

The discrepancies between work, home and school life usually take the form of continuous efforts to manage the conflicting responsibilities and pressures that emerge from inevitable obligations in the different domains (Cinamon & Rich, 2010; Geurts & Demerouti, 2003). Consequently, the higher the conflict is, the more are the challenges, which non-traditional students must confront. Hence, subsequent time and resource constraints, as well as, inherent time and role demands, most likely result to strain and work-family-school conflict, experienced as work problems, negative ramifications on marriage and disengagement from school (Kirby et al., 2004). Thus, work-family conflict may result to poor physical and psychological health (e.g. depression, irritation, burnout), behavioral disorders (e.g. substance abuse), reduced satisfaction and unfulfilled personal and organizational commitment (Cinamon, 2006; Kelly & Moen, 2007). Minimal support from supervisors, family, professors and peers most likely worsens the conflict (Adebayo, 2006).

Hence, besides the negative impact on the person, because of reduced job performance, and increased absenteeism and turnover, the organization is harmfully affected, too, in terms of productivity and profitability (Ilies et al., 2007; Walsh, 2005). Furthermore, evidence indicates that non-traditional students are less likely than their traditional counterparts to obtain a degree, and that prolonged periods of enrollment are related to increased absenteeism (i.e. excused or unexcused absences) from school (Kearney, 2008; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). While occasional absenteeism is typically non-problematic, excessive absenteeism can interfere with continuity of learning and thus may lead to dropout, while it is related to serious problems, such as violence and substance abuse (Kearney, 2008).

Trying to understand the reasons related to dropout, Kirby et al. (2004) found that family size and time constraints may influence the experience of conflict and eventually lead to dropout. Thus, the greatest overload and the most intense conflict are experienced by working students with children (Sweet & Moen, 2007). Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) indicated that one additional child reduces the chance of degree completion by about 50% for both genders. Moreover, it was reported that longer hours spent working are associated with poorer academic

performance and longer time to graduation, while high workload may hamper the effective functioning of worker-students in school (Adebayo, 2006; Butler, 2007).

Hence, it appears that nonattendance and withdrawal behavior may be attributed rather to increased and complex responsibilities from other domains (e.g. prolonged work hours and childcare), which interfere with class attendance, than to disliking school, as it often the cases for traditional students (Kearney, 2008). Since evidence suggests though that the potential for a future career, based on further studies, could motivate non-traditional students and outweigh the role conflict (Sweet & Moen, 2007), it seems essential to better explore the role academic motivation might have for non-traditional students.

Academic motivation

Academic motivation may be defined as the positive state during which the student is able to identify strengths and form goals and action plans related to future aspirations, while self-efficacy and positive meanings about schooling are developed (Scheel et al., 2009). Put more simply, academic motivation encompasses the factors that influence a person's decision to attend school and to obtain a degree (Clark & Schroth, 2010). In contrast, low motivation is closely related to high degree of conflict and withdrawal intentions (Fortier, Vallerand & Guay, 2002; Kirby et al., 2004). Thereby, the decisive role of motivation in school attendance seems to be highlighted. In fact, due to its inherent productive and activating nature, motivation has always been highly valued among people involved in mobilizing others, such as teachers aiming at student retention (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

In contrast, it was found that reduced academic motivation is a salient precursor of dropout behaviour and increased absenteeism (Fortier et al., 2002; Ratelle et al., 2007). Hence, it may be concluded that academic motivation may play a twofold role: either to facilitate or hinder regular presence at school, depending on the motivation level. However, even at high levels, motivation may be disrupted under non supportive circumstances, such as threats, deadlines and pressure from external factors (Ratelle et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In contrast, through supportive conditions, this tendency may be elicited and sustained (Fortier

et al., 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000a; 2000b). Consequently, it seems that the conflict of work and family obligations may seriously affect regular school attendance. However, academic motivation, as a variable closely related to the educational experience, may constitute one key factor for eliminating the negative effects.

The rationale for the study

It is noteworthy that much literature has extensively studied the work-family conflict phenomenon and the negative implications for the employee and the organization (e.g. Cohen et al., 2009; Nabavi & Shahryari, 2014). However, little attention has been paid on the impact of work-family conflict on other areas, besides work and home, which may constitute a vital part of the employee life, such as schooling. Furthermore, whereas research has indicated that absenteeism and consequently school dropout may have severe consequences for the individuals and their future, including low wages, marginalization, and higher probability of imprisonment (Scheel, Madabhushi & Backhaus, 2009; Kearney, 2008), comparatively few studies have investigated the relationship of being a worker *and* having a family to manage *and* going to school with regular school attendance. Hence, proposed solutions to alleviate work-family-school conflict are limited as well.

Most importantly, the focus of the existing scarce research has focused mostly on returned part-time college students (e.g. Sweet & Moen, 2007), while no research was found regarding non-traditional high-school students. Hence, it seems essential to study the impact of work-family-school conflict on absenteeism and school dropout regarding non-traditional high-school students with jobs and families to manage, as it is the case in Esperino of Cyprus, and the role of academic motivation, as a potential factor related to increased school attendance and likelihood to accomplish high-school. Based on the above, the following research questions emerged:

• What is the relationship between work-family-school conflict and dropout behavior for non-traditional students in Cyprus?

• What is the role of academic motivation in dropout behavior regarding non-traditional students in Cyprus?

Methodology

In order to explore the relationship between work-family-school conflict and dropout behavior for non-traditional high-school students in Cyprus and the role of academic motivation, a mixed-method research was conducted, in two phases. The study was conducted in one Esperino school that was randomly selected from the five Esperino schools in Cyprus.

First phase of the study

During the first phase, the aim was to get a preliminary understanding of the impact of work-family-school conflict on dropout intention and absenteeism. To this end, structured interviews were conducted with former Esperino students that had dropped out of Esperino, as well as registered students with a high number of absences, i.e. above 30 for the first month of the new school year 2018-19. The interview protocol included questions regarding the reasons related to either dropout or absenteeism and the interviewees' intention to either return or remain at school. The interviewees were selected with purposive sampling, based on the students' records of the Esperino that participated in the study.

The initial contact was made by the assistant head-teacher, who called the former and current students and asked them to participate in the study. Then their names and contact numbers were given to the researcher, who called them and arranged the place and time of the interviews. In total, 14 persons agreed to participate in the interviews, which were interviewed either at school or at a place of their choice. Nine participants were registered students and five were former students. Their age ranged from 21 to 46 years old. Seven participants were men and seven were women. All of the participants were working from 30 to 60 hours per week. Eight of the participants were single parents and six were living with a partner. The interviewees had from one to five children. The interviews lasted 20-30 minutes. Data from the interviews were analyzed with thematic analysis.

Second phase of the study

During the second phase of the study, a questionnaire was delivered to all the students of the selected Esperino. The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first part gathered demographic information. The second part included Hammer's work-family-school conflict scale, as adapted by Kirby et al. (2004), in order to assess work-family-school conflict. The particular scale was selected because of good reliability α=0.87 (Kirby et al., 2004). The scale included 26 items in a Likert-type scale. In order to calculate academic motivation, Vallerand's Academic Motivational Scale (AMS) (Ratelle et al., 2007) was employed. The scale has good reliability that ranges from α=0.83 to 0.86. The AMS consists of 20 items, which measure motivation, with a Likert-type scale. In the fourth part, the two items from Vallerand et al.'s (1997) study were used, so as to measure the students' dropout intentions. Vallerand et al. (1997) found that the reliability of the scale was α=0.63. The questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of Esperino students.

After taking permission from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the headteacher of Esperino to conduct the study, the researcher arranged a date when the questionnaire would be delivered to the students. Firstly, the purposes of the study were explained to the teachers of Esperino, who were asked to administer the questionnaires to their students and give them 10 minutes for their completion. A cover sheet was administered together with the questionnaire including a description of the study's purpose, information about the participants' right to withdraw, and the option to include full name and address if participants wanted a copy of the results. Written instructions were given as well regarding the scale completion. On receipt, the cover sheets and the questionnaires were separated, so as to keep the respondent's identity confidential and the questionnaire anonymous. Participation was voluntary.

In total, 57 students participated in the research out of 94 registered students. Their age ranged from 16 to 46 years old (mean: 28.89 years). Participants have been attending Esperino for up to 6 years (mean: 2.54 years) and they had up to 5 years left for graduation (mean: 2.16 years). Participants had up to 5 children (mean: 0.61 children) and were working up to 60 hours per week (mean: 31.09 hours per week). The mean number of absences was 53.25 (standard deviation 43.228, minimum=0, maximum=170). This number represents only the absences for the first two months of the academic year of the study and only for the students that participated in the study. Data from students that were not in

the school the day when the research was conducted are missing. The gathered data were further analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics on SPSS 20.

The social support model and self-determination theory

In order to explain the findings of this study the Social Support Model and Self-Determination Theory were employed. Firstly, the Social Support Model (SSM) was chosen because research findings on work-family-school conflict underline the important role of social support in either increasing or decreasing the above conflict (Adebayo, 2006). Secondly, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was chosen because it is an approach to human motivation, which highlights the importance of both inner resources and social-contextual conditions that facilitate self-motivation and engagement in learning activities (Ryan and Deci, 2000a; 2000b), which are important for non-traditional students (Sweet & Moen, 2007).

According to SPM then, social support may be offered at the emotional, tangible, informational and companionship level. Emotional support includes empathy, affection, encouragement and caring. Tangible support is provided through financial assistance, goods and services. Informational support includes advice, suggestions and guidance. Finally, companionship support offers a sense of belonging. Social support is distinguished between perceived and received support. Perceived support includes the person's perceptions about the support that is expected to be offered when the person needs it. In contrast, received support refers to the support that is actually provided to the person in need of support (Taylor, 2011; Wills, 1985).

Moreover, according to SDT, motivation is a continuum ranging from intrinsic motivation, i.e. behaviors that occur out of pleasure, to amotivation, i.e. lack of motivation and intention to act. Being somewhere in the middle, extrinsic motivation, i.e. behavior aiming at goal achievement and rewards, consists of the external regulation (external rewards and punishments), introjected regulation (internalizing the importance of academic pursuit) and identified regulation (identification with academic values). Likewise, intrinsic motivation consists of the internal locus of control, drive for accomplishments, and desire for intellectual simulation, which result in enthusiasm

for learning (Clark and Schroth, 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2000b). Although the most positive outcomes occur when autonomous (i.e. intrinsic) motives are emphasized, importantly for educators, students can be motivated by controlled (i.e. extrinsic) motives as well, while both types contribute significantly to psychological well-being (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci and Kasser, 2004).

Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis indicated three major themes that emerged from the interviewees' answers. Firstly, the participants talked about their lived experiences of work-family-school conflict and the factors related to its occurrence. Secondly, they explained that the obvious solution to resolving, at least temporarily, the above conflict was increased absenteeism. Thirdly, because exceeding the allowed number of absences eventually increased the conflict, they admitted reaching a dead-lock, which, coupled with limited support and increased pressure, prompted them to dropout.

Experience of work-family-school conflict

All the participants indicated that they experienced tension in their lives because finding the balance between work, family and school obligations was too hard. Rena, a single mother with a 9-year-old daughter, explained:

"I really want to come to school but my employer doesn't let me. He says that he will fire me if I leave. And then I have my daughter at home alone, and I am a single mother, and my mother cannot look after her. She is my responsibility anyway, I know that".

As Petros, a married student, with twin 8-year-old daughters, admits, the conflict between the different roles is often unbearable, particularly when school obligations become a burden for the rest of the family:

"My wife is working all day, and when she comes home, she wants to do the housework. And she needs my help, and then I must come to school, and she must manage everything herself, the house and the twins, and I feel guilty because it's not fair".

The experience of work-family-school conflict is frustrating and stressful for the students, affecting all the aspects of their life. Despo, a divorced former student with two children,

dropped out because she could not manage the simultaneous pressure from the different domains:

> "I didn't know what to do. I felt that it was wrong whatever I was doing. And every day I asked myself what to do; go to school and lose my job and leave my children alone? Who would help them with their homework? Who would clean, cook, wash the clothes? And when I was at home, I felt that I was nothing, I had not finished school, and I would never find a better job, because employers ask for a high-school degree. And I was frustrated and stressed, and I didn't know what to do. But I had nobody to help me with the kids, and I couldn' t stop working, or pay somebody to stay with my children. And then I didn't go to school again".

Absenteeism as the apparent solution

The apparent solution to work-family-school conflict for the students who were still at school was absenteeism. Since being fired or stop taking care of their children was not negotiable, they chose to be less engaged with school obligations. Hence, they started being absent from school. Maria, a divorced student with five children, expressed her frustration that led her to believe that absenteeism was her only choice:

> "I have so many things to do every day. I cannot stop going to work, I cannot stop taking care after my children. I work from 5 o'clock in the morning till 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Then I have my children, feed them, do their homework, clean the house, and then I must come to school. Until then I am exhausted. And I stay at home for one day, and the other day I go to school, and then I stay at home, and then I go to school. It's the only solution. I don't have a choice".

Eleni, a divorced student with a 12-year-old daughter, explains that school is the less oppressive factor for work-family-school conflict. For this reason, school became the last priority, while the first two priorities were going to work every day and staying with her family the longer possible:

> "I make a lot of absences from school because I know that teachers will understand. On the other hand, my boss will not understand if I don't go to work and my child will be awake and alone until I return home. And sometimes she is afraid to stay at home alone or she is ill, and I have to stay with her".

According to Antonis, a married student with a 2-year-old son, the more the pressure from work-family-school conflict, the more is the likelihood for dropout from school:

> "If the pressure continues, I will have to dropout. I have no help, I need the job, I have a baby at home and my wife must go to work, too. And I work on weekends also to get some more money, because the bills are more now with the baby. And when I come to school I just want to lie down on my desk and sleep".

Importantly, most of the participants expressed limited desire to continue their studies in tertiary education, because they believed that they would not be able to manage a more intense work-family-school conflict that would occur from increased academic obligations, without support. Panagiota, a divorced student with a 10-year-old daughter and an 8-year-old son, explained that:

> "Even if I manage to stay and get my degree, I will not continue with tertiary education. I wanted to, but I cannot see how I will manage to do this with two children and no support".

Dropout at the deadlock

Andri, a married former student with two children, dropped out because she did not have support from her husband. She also felt helpless and obliged to make a financial contribution to her family:

> "There was no point to come to school once or twice a month. I couldn't afford losing my job. We had too many bills to pay and a family to feed. And my husband was not supportive, and I had nobody to help me".

Doros, a newly wed former student with a newborn, felt that going back to school would be detrimental for his work and his family. As a hairdresser, he did not have a fixed time scheduled. Trying to respond to his clients' needs and become financially independent, he decided to dropout from Esperino school, which, for him, had become an obstacle to professional development:

> "My clients were calling me and asking to come late in the evening. I couldn't say no because I would lose them, and I couldn't afford it. It was a deadlock for me. Either do my job as a hairdresser and support my family or go back to school and destroy everything else. I have a baby now and he is my priority".

Quantitative findings

Descriptive analysis indicated that almost half of the participants experienced work-family-school conflict (41.46%), which was not surprising since students of the particular Esperino school had up to five children and worked up to 60 hours per week. In addition, almost all the participants were academically motivated (95.83%). This finding may explain why the participants were present at the day of the research. However, it was found that some of the participants intended to dropout (14.29%). It was also found that men rather than women have increased intention to dropout from school (χ^2=4.554, p<0.05). As expected, students who experienced work-family-school conflict had increased intention to dropout from school compared to those that did not experience work-family-school conflict (χ^2=5.523, p<0.05).

In addition, a positive correlation of absenteeism with the number of children and work hours was found. Thus, the more children the participants had and the more hours they worked, the more absences they had (r=0.309, p<0.05 and r=0.412, p<0.01, respectively). Moreover, a significant negative correlation was found between academic motivation and dropout intention (r=-0.560, p<0.01), i.e. when academic motivation increased, dropout intention decreased and the opposite. Multiple regression indicated that academic motivation could predict dropout intention, explaining 27.6% of the variance. The model was defined as 'dropout intention=7.863 + (-0.062academic motivation)'. Furthermore, it was found that dropout intention could predict work-family-school conflict, explaining 13.3% of variance. The model was defined as 'work-family-school conflict=47.382 + (2.789dropout intention)'. In other words, when academic motivation decreases, an increase in dropout intention occurs. Moreover, when dropout intention increases, an increase in work-family-school conflict occurs. It may be assumed then that an interaction between academic motivation, dropout intention and work-family-school conflict may be likely.

Discussion

This study was a real-life test of current theory and research on work-family-school conflict and academic motivation. A very important finding was the participants' struggle to find ways to manage work-family-school conflict and restore the imbalance that occurred in their lives, because of their decision to return to high-school. Despite the acknowledged importance of schooling, participants in this research indicated that work-family-school conflict was a huge problem that became excruciating and unresolvable because of lack of social support and increased pressures from all the domains simultaneously. The participants identified as missing social support the ethical and psychological support that could have been provided by family members and friends and the tangible support provided by employers, in the form of flexible work-schedule and work hours.

As explained by the SSM, social support is essential in order to encourage people to accomplish tasks, remain focused and be determined to achieve their goals, particularly when life is considered hard and chances for improvement are limited (Taylor, 2011). Thus, in the case of Esperino students, as disclosed by the participants, lack of social support in harsh times of tyrannical needs has resulted to absenteeism and was a detrimental factor for their decision to drop out. The above observations are consistent with previous findings that indicated a positive correlation of work-family-school conflict with work and family problems, tenseness, unfulfilled personal commitments and disengagement from school (Hammer, Grigsby and Woods, 1998; Kirby et al., 2004).

Similarly, the perception of less support was an important factor for increased work-family-school conflict regarding college students with preschool children in a study by Fujimoto et al. (2008). Likewise, in Samuel and Burger's (2019) study with 4956 adolescent students, social support was negatively related to school dropout. It seems then that the entanglement of work-family-school conflict with lack of counterbalancing factors may be actually more related to non-traditional students' dropout behavior than the mere conflict itself. The above assumption may be confirmed by the findings of this research, which indicated that, even though almost half of the participants experienced work-family-school conflict, only a small percentage had dropout intentions. Hence, questions have emerged regarding likely entanglement of factors that may either perplex or discharge work-family-school conflict.

Actually, as suggested by SSM, provision of social support may decrease work-family-school conflict (Taylor, 2011; Wills, 1985). Hence it seems imperative for Esperino teachers to offer emotional support to the students by listening to them, encouraging them and showing empathy. In addition, tangible support may be provided by offering scholarships for Esperino students that would like to continue to tertiary education. Moreover, informational support by the school counsellor regarding future professional choices and opportunities to pursue a better career would be of great importance. Furthermore, companionship support through the establishment of Esperino students' associations and support groups for the students and their families may enhance the sense of belonging and encourage non-traditional students and their families to share their experiences and frustration on the one hand and on the other to stay focused to accomplish the goal of graduating from high-school. As confirmed by the participants, not having social support complicated the conflict and rendered it unbearable and unsolvable.

Moreover, the negative impact of prolonged work hours and having children on school attendance was confirmed in this research, which was also underlined by other researchers (e.g. Sweet & Moen, 2007; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Thereby potential insights concerning future interventions, such as flextime and childcare facilities (Kirby et al., 2004), have emerged. Although more research may be needed in order to be conclusive in this matter, the study has indicated that policy makers and Esperino teachers in Cyprus ought to find ways to alleviate work-family-school conflict and increase academic motivation regarding non-traditional students. For example, by adopting more innovative teaching methods or by re-designing the school curriculum, schools would become more practical and relevant to the students' daily routines (Yeung & McInerney, 2005). According to SDT, fostering such positive social-contextual conditions is of major importance for tackling absenteeism: in this way, the self-motivation process may be facilitated, and thereby dropout behavior may be eventually eliminated (Ratelle et al., 2007).

Despite the complexity of work-family-school conflict and its relation to non-traditional students' school attendance, a better understanding of the process and the factors involved in absenteeism and eventually dropping out of high-school was provided in this study. Thus, the important role of academic motivation was highlighted. As found in the qualitative phase, almost all of the students that were present on the day of the research were academically motivated. As explained by SDT, motivation may activate people towards goal achievement and render them more resilient and determined to accomplish tasks, despite the apparent adversities (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). It may be assumed then that the students that were absent, were the ones that were less motivated and therefore were less prepared to struggle, overcome the complex demands and manage effectively the conflicting roles of being a student, a parent and an employee at the same time.

In fact, as found in this research, academic motivation may predict dropout intention, while dropout intention may predict work-family-school conflict. Hence, it may be assumed that an increase in academic motivation may result to a decrease both in dropout intention and work-family-school conflict. It has to be noted that this finding has important implications for school administration. Because of its authority position, administration appears to be in a prime position to influence the general school climate and thereby have an impact on students' academic motivation (Vallerand et al., 1997). As an initial step then, teachers might be encouraged to identify students at dropout risk (e.g. student-parents), in order to monitor their progress and provide support if needed. Furthermore, by rendering learning a pleasant experience and rewarding the students, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may be enhanced, respectively (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Actually, high levels of motivation might moderate the impact of work-family-school conflict on absenteeism, and thus improve dropout behaviour. Moreover, in accordance with SDT, provision of additional academic and psychological support for students with children, overloaded work hours and high absenteeism rates should be considered. Thus, their potential for degree completion would be maximized (Cohen, Duberley & Musson, 2009).

Likewise, there are implications for the employers who might contemplate communication and joint efforts with teachers in order to facilitate working students. By addressing concerns related to work status, academic preparedness and childcare, the drawbacks regarding high-school completion may

be outweighed (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Thus, flexible work schedules for employees attending high-school may be considered, in order to alleviate the pressure from the work domain. Given that the findings of this research and SSM support this line of reasoning, programs and strategies may be developed to meet the educational and psychological needs of Esperino students regarding school, family and work life. Such changes may include restructuring class and work schedules, offering new courses and stress management workshops, and providing the option of summer or distant learning courses. In this way, work-family-school conflict might decrease and thereby the likelihood of graduation may increase. As supported by research (e.g. Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2005), by fostering high-school completion, a more educated and productive workforce may be created that may render investments in further research and program development cost-effective.

Limitations

The main limitations of this study include the small number of students that participated in the research and the missing data from students with a high number of absences that were not in the school the day of the research. For this reason, the findings should be interpreted with caution, since the absent students most probably were the ones with increased absenteeism and reduced motivation levels. Hence the results of this research may be biased, while important information may be missing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that there is a positive relationship between work-family-school conflict and dropout behavior for non-traditional students in Cyprus. Work-family-school conflict seems to be more intense for students who have more children, work more hours and have limited perceived social support. Hence, it may be assumed that interventions aiming to decrease work-family-school conflict and increase academic motivation, should provide emotional, tangible, informational and companionship support to non-traditional students. In this way, returned students may be retained at Esperino school and graduation from high-school may become more likely, with benefits for the students and the society.

According to the strategy Europe 2020, the share of early school leavers in Europe by year 2020 should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree. In this way it is expected that the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth may be achieved, resulting to coming out of the financial crisis stronger (European Commission, 2010). However, in order to achieve the above goal, it is important to understand the reasons that not only prompt students to leave school early but also push them to dropout for second -and maybe final- time, which was the purpose of this study. Even though several limitations have been noted, this is the first study that is conducted with the population of Esperino students in Cyprus, i.e. former early school leavers and current returned students. Hence, this study offers important insights regarding repeated dropout behavior, which may initiate further research or become the basis for strategic planning in education.

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