EVALUATION OF READING PRACTICES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN GREECE

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education was not a central public issue for a long time. However, nowadays early childhood education and care (ECEC) is recognized as of primary importance in all European countries. The aims are "better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large" (OECD 2012 Starting Strong III, p. 9). The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy have stated: "Increasing investment in high-quality ECEC is one of the best investments Member States can make in Europe's future human capital. In order to achieve 'high quality' highly-qualified staff is needed, as well as a curriculum focused on language development through play with an emphasis on language, psychomotor and social development, and emerging literacy skills, building on children's natural developmental stages." (High Level Group Report, 2012a, p. 59)..

The Greek education system is governed by national laws and legislative acts (decrees, ministerial decisions), while the general responsibility for education lies with the Ministry of Education, Research and Religion. All schools in Greece implement centrally specified curricula and weekly timetables, i.e., the educational system is centralised. The structure of the school system for preschool and primary education includes a) Early education (0- 6 years), including antepreschool (0-3 years) and preschool/pre-primary education (3–6 years) and (b) Primary education (6-12 years).

Pre-primary education in Greece begins at the age of 4, when children are enrolled in kindergarten (Nipiagogia). Since the school year 2007-2008, the attendance was compulsory only for children aged 5 years old and as of 2019, it is compulsory for children 4 years old as well. There are half- and all-day kindergartens. The aim of both is to fully prepare the child for primary education, support working parents and reinforce the role of state care in order to eliminate any educational-social discrimination. The operation of kindergartens is governed by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religion. For children aged less than 4 years old, centre-based day care provision operates under the auspices of the Municipal Authorities and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There are two types of centre-based day cares: (a) the Infant-Toddler Centres (Vrefonipiaki Stathmi) for children aged 6 months to 2.5 years; and (b) the Child Centres (Pediki Stathmi) for children aged 2.5-5 years old. After the adoption of Decree Number 100872/Δ1 B' 2569/27.06.2019, at the age of 4, all children have to be enrolled in a

kindergarten classroom. It is considered that attending ECEC brings a lot of benefits to children, given that the more the children attend ECEC the better is their reading performance later on in grade 4. Because of the low enrollment rate in ECEC before the age of 4, it has been suggested by the European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET) that Greece should strive to increase the number of children who attend preschool education more than 3 years.

According to the European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET) 2016 "Report On Literacy In Greece",

> fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of pre-school institutions and provides a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school (Tafa, 2008, 2011). In Greece the kindergarten CrossThematic Curriculum Framework is based on the emergent literacy philosophy and highlights that children, through the context of play, should be provided with opportunities for developing awareness of their written language system (Ministerial Decision G 2/21072b (FEK. 304/13-3-2003/t.B´, p. 593-597). The curriculum sets goals that help children understand the directional rules of print, that print and not pictures carry the message, that different kinds of print carry messages in different ways and that letters have names and sounds. Children are encouraged to discover very common words in texts and to recognise them in the environmental print. Moreover, children are helped to understand story structure when stories are read aloud to them and to name different kinds of texts. They are also encouraged to write their names, their friends' names, as well as small, frequently used words. In addition, there are goals to encourage children to understand the 'technical' language of literacy (e.g. page number, first line, book title, book cover, etc.), as well as punctuation. In addition, the kindergarten curriculum emphasises the enrichment of the classroom environment with books and reading and writing materials and strongly suggests the use of environmental print**.**

However, researchers such as Stellakis (2005 &2012) have found that in reality Greek pre-primary education teachers "restrict early literacy instruction by emphasizing copying words and phonemes-graphemes correspondence' and that they focus on the pupils' ability to write their names, copy words, know letter sounds and write some simple words. Stellakis (ibid) notes that despite this, children in his study, especially those who had attended pre-primary education for two years, seemed to gain a lot from more inclusive activities, even within the frame of these traditional programs. He concludes that "even more traditional school practices support literacy development".

In the Greek educational system, it is considered that preschool programmes should **"focus on developing children's emergent literacy skills through playful experience rather than systematic training in phonics or teaching the alphabet"**. This is based on the lack of evidence that systematic instruction of reading in preschool has any benefit for future learning (Suggate 2012). Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. Key components for literacy are the following:

- oral language development, including vocabulary learning and grammar,
- familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told),
- being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities,
- experiencing a literacy-rich environment,
- developing concepts of print, and language awareness

Since 2003 the Greek Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework (See: http://www.pi-schools.gr/programs/depps/index_eng.php) for compulsory education is nationally implemented in all private and public schools. The basic principle of this curriculum is ensuring pedagogical continuity on different levels of education. It aims to adjust "teaching aims and methodology, while focusing on the balanced distribution of teaching content among all grade levels and the horizontal linking of all subject content, seeking to cover a greater variety of topics" (Alahiotis, 2003). In kindergarten the Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework sets guidelines for programmes about planning and development of activities in Language, Mathematics, Studies of the Environment, Creation and Expression and Computer Literacy.

Even though the Greek early childhood education curriculum implementation is monitored by the School Counsellors who are appointed by the Ministry of Education, for young children enrolled in the centre-based day cares, this curriculum is not monitored by an authority. Only annual reports for the implemented activities are given to the local Social Welfare Department.

1.1 Sociodemographic data of kindergarten teachers

The questionnaire was sent to hundreds of schools and it was replied by 121 kindergarten teachers mostly from Patra, Thessaloniki and Athens. All of them are women, specifically 99%. Less than half of the teachers (42%) are in the age range of 46 to 55 years, followed by teachers aged between 36 to 45 years (21%). As for the youngest teachers, under the age of 26, there is a very low percentage (1%). Regarding their studies, 61% are graduates 34% Master's, 5% PhD. Concerning teaching experience, 57% have more than 16 years of teaching experience. Regarding the seminars they have attended, 53% have attended 1-3 seminars in the last five years as shown in Figure 1. Almost all of them are not support teachers (96%)
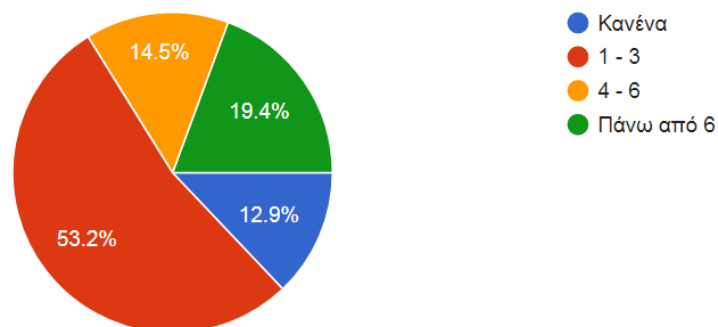

Figure 1: Number of seminars attended in the last 5 years

Most of them (82%) teach both 4-year-old and 5-year old children.

Teachers use an eclectic methodology of the various methodologies for teaching reading skills. Table 1 summarizes the methodologies and reading strategies for the development of reading competence in early childhood education students.

MORE USED METHODS	LESS USED METHODS
82% Phonological awareness	25% Alphabetic
46% Phonic	13% Constructivism
44% Mixed	
36% Syllabic	
31% Global	

Table 1: Methodologies and reading strategies for the development of reading competence

In relation to the practical difficulties found in reading, they involve principally Reading techniques (44%) written comprehension (36%) followed by oral comprehension (34%). They don't see promoting Reading for Pleasure (56%) as an issue, as it is reported as a difficulty only by 24%. It is not clear if it is because it is not something they expect from children or because children of this age love reading. Along the same lines, to promote reading, the materials they use the most in class are from the school library (83%)j and the classroom library (82%) and books brought from home (63%). Very few use a textbook (13%).

As for the type of center where the participating teachers are located, the majority are in urban settings (62%) and the minority, in rural settings (38%). Schools in this particular sample are 65% public and 35% private.

Almost all teachers (94%) indicate that in their center, teachers establish measures to promote access to reading, both at school and in the family, to provide an environment that encourages and invites children to read in both contexts. Only 34% indicate having been in centers with innovative practices and 18% have participated in Institutional or Administration Projects related to the teaching of reading. 84% report the existence, either in the center where they currently work or have worked, of a reading method prescribed by the Ministry of Education

1.2 Description of primary school families

The sample is made up of 123 parents of children enrolled in the Early Childhood Education stage (Nipiagogia) in educational centers from different parts of Greece, including Athens, Thessaloniki, Patra, Trikala, Korinthos and Aigeira.

To better understand the nature of the results, we will describe the characteristics of the participating families. 90% of families are two-parent while 10% are single-parent. The number of children per family are indicated in Figure 2.
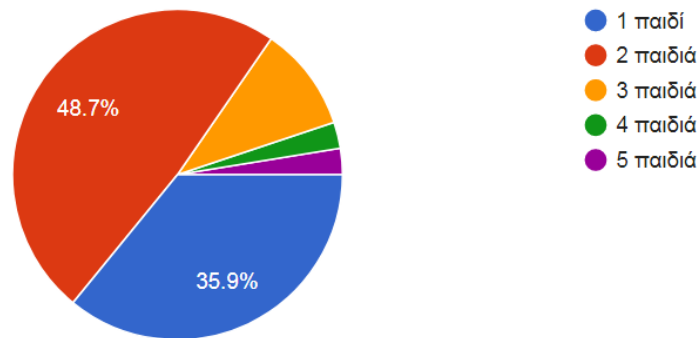
Figure2 : Number of children in family

With regard to the nationality of the parents, 93% of mothers and 99% of fathers are Greek with the rest of nationalities including Cypriot, British and Italian. Other characteristics include:

- 100% can write and read in Greek
- 91% of the mothers are university graduates
- 78% of the fathers are university graduates
- 82% of the mothers are employed, 10% do household activities and 8% are unemployed
- 99% of the fathers are employed and 1% unemployed.

It has to be noted that these percentages are not representative of the Greek population. Our estimation is that, since the questionnaire was voluntary, the parents who chose to answer it, in other words the type of parents interested in the Promotion of Reading (especially in young ages) are the ones with the above characteristics.

2. TEACHING METHODOLOGY IN READING LEARNING

According to the Eurydice report "Teaching Reading in Europe" (EC/EACEA/2011), the following elements of emergent literacy skills are included in steering documents at pre-primary level in Greece:

Knowledge and understanding of print:

- Different types of printed material (magazines, recipe, story books, etc

- awareness that print carries meaning,

- conventional direction of reading,

- frequency of reading activities,

- organisation of written language,

- frequency of writing activities.

Phonological awareness:

- playing with language using nonsense words and rhyming,

- exploring and experimenting with sounds, words and texts, and

Breaking down speech into small units, blending syllables or sounds in words is not considered in the curriculum.

Word identification/recognition:

• Read a range of familiar and common words independently

• Progression in recognising words (short to long)

• Enriching vocabulary

• Writing own name from memory

Using word recognition as a reading strategy and writing other words from memory are not considered in the curriculum.

Knowledge of phonics:

• Linking sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet

• Drawing the forms of letters

Combining letters, understanding that same sound can have a different spelling and using knowledge of letters, sounds and words when writing are not considered in the curriculum.

Fluency

None of the below skills are included in the Greek curriculum:

• Reading simple sentences or simple texts independently

• Repeated practise of reading aloud

• Gradual shifting from reading aloud to reading silently

• Reading various kinds of texts fluently, without mistakes and with appropriate intonation

Many of the same word identification/recognition and phonics skills in steering documents appear at pre-primary level, indicating that children in Greece are exposed to these elements from an early stage in their education.

Regarding inter-stage coordination, there is no law that requires schools to implement a programme for the smooth children's transition from kindergarten to primary school. Therefore only half of the teachers (51%) share objectives, work methodologies, routines, evaluation, as well as resources in their educational centers. In order to promote reading learning, it is common to establish shared actions between students at both levels (64%) to put them into practice. Regular meeting are sometimes planned to unify criteria between both stages (54%). In the same way, reading exchanges sometimes are carried out (64%) and to a lesser extent, projects and curricular materials are designed (50%).

2.1 Teaching methodologies: Strategies that facilitate learning reading

The table below summarizes the percentages of teachers using specific methods or not. They are divided into two categories depending on whether they are often/always used, or rarely/never used.

Often / Always	Rarely /Never
Learn syllables, then words. 96%	Follow the alphabetical order. 80%
Learn the letters by presenting a word whose initial is the sample, accompanied by their illustration. 70%	Study each letter by pronouncing its name. 64%
Use onomatopeic sounds to understand the phonemes (e.g. fffff for wind). 76%	Combine consonants with vowels for detail first direct syllables, then inverse syllables and finally, mixed syllables. 50%
Identify texts such as songs, fairytales, etc. 84%	Classify images according to their syllabic structure (number of syllables per word). 42%
Promote communicative capacities (active listening, empathy, dialogue, assertiveness, argumentation) 95%	Do activities to learn how to differentiate words from pseudo-words. 57%
Promote use of different types of language (body, gestural, musical, plastic, etc).	Carry out activities in which you can add and/or delete syllables. 53%
Play games counting syllables (with or without clapping). 83%	Begin by teaching the learning of the sound of voices, then the sounds of diphthongs and, finally, the sound of consonants. 54%
Play rhyming games . 74%	Two sentences for students to indicate which word has been added, changed and/or removed. 34%
Ask students to indicate whether a word starts, contains, or ends with a given phoneme. 88%	Name one word from a picture omitting the syllable shown before (initial, middle or last) 55%
Use the intonation of fairytales and rhythm of songs. 69%	Carry out activities in which you can add and/or delete syllables. 57%
Use meaningful words for students (their own name, personal tastes,etc) 91%	Teach the syllable as part of the word. 50%
Present various words and sentences that refer to the elements around them and are part of their daily environment and routines. 83%	
Present words for students to indicate whether it starts, contains, or ends with a given phoneme. 81%	

Often / Always
The tasks of written language are related to the development of oral language. 70%
Carry out activities in which the position of phonemes within words must be distinguished. 55%
The teaching-learning process of reading and writing are exercised simultaneously. 56%
Show words together with letters so that students can recognise words and letters. 71%
Count syllables to differentiate long from short words. 68%
Propose situations that encourage the creativity of students. 87%

2.2 Psychopedagogical principles and reading learning methodology

The following table summarizes the psychopedagogical principles and reading learning methodology used by the kindergarten teachers who responded the questionnaire

More used	Less used
I ask the students questions while reading texts to ensure their understanding. 98%	I organize the classroom according to the needs of students with different learning corners and workshops.
I establish dynamics of animation to the reading (change of characters, changes of endings, creation of stories with images ...). 98%	
I take advantage of the comments that my students make during reading activities, even if it is not related to what we are dealing with. 97%	
I establish relationships between written language and oral language. 92%	

2.3 Organization of activities (programming or planning, timing, student grouping)

The following table summarizes the organization of activities, categorized according to whether they are more used or less used:

More used	Less used
Teachers carry out reading activities in large groups. 81%	Publisher textbook to learn how to read. 6%
Teachers establish time dedicated to learning to read, either through assembly, corners or other type of strategy. 87%	Activities using a notebook where we write students' interests. 12%
I organize groups taking into account that they have students with different reading levels. 62%	Other agents of the school or other professionals participate in my classroom in actions that promote the reading learning of my students. 25%
I organize activities in small groups. 68%	I use the whiteboard for reading activities (videos, games, children's websites...). 17%
I encourage students to interpret the images even though they can't read. 100%	Other agents participate in the promotion of reading. 28%
Establish the relationship between the written and spoken word. 92%	
Teachers who take as a criterion to form the groups that students have with a different reading level. 62%	

2.4 Space, material and human resources (type, organization, participants, type of participation)

Regarding space, material and human resources, the following aspects are all used to a larger or lesser degree by the kindergarten teachers surveyed.

More used
I use ICT to create stories (story Bird, story cubes). 70%
I provide information to families to encourage reading learning at home (workshops, quarterly meetings, tutoring, family school…). 65%
Families participate in classroom reading-related activities. 76%
The classroom has a quiet place dedicated to individual reading. 97%
In class I use various ICT resources to perform interactive reading activities (internet, whiteboard, book material or created). 78%
I use different text types (albums, fairytales, cookbooks, newspapers). 98%

2.5 Evaluation

Evaluation methods are categorized into two sections depending on whether they are more or less used.

More used	Less used
I do an initial evaluation at the beginning of the school year. 83%	I analyze different moments in the classroom during the course to evaluate the reading learning of my students. 32%
I analyze students work for evaluation. 75%	I evaluate students during the school year with reading tests. 37%
At the end of a reading task, students reflect on what has been learned. 76%	I use a specific rubric on reading competence to evaluate my students. 20%

2.6 Types of text

The following table summarizes the types of text used into two categories:

More used	Less used
Literary 85%	Instructions 27%
Description / Expository 71%	Enumerative 35%
	Informative 17%

Examples of texts together with the percentage used are listed below:

ENUMERATIVE TEXT

01. Listings (purchase, toys, class, story titles …). 90%

02. Labels (of clothes, food …).81%

03. Schedules (of TV programs, school activities, home …). 58%

04. Index (books, magazines, stories …).79%

05. Encyclopaedias, dictionaries, atlas …75%

06. Brochures and posters. 95%

07. Menus (school, restaurant). 45%

08. Catalogues, phone books, agendas ... 68%

09. Cooking recipes. 93%

EXPOSITIVE TEXT

11. Reviews on biographies, school outings, experiments ... 79%

12. Textbooks or school books. 60%

13. Texts for the development of an oral exhibition. 77%

PRESCRIPTIVE TEXT

15. Instructions. 84%

16. Rules (game, behaviour ...) 100%

17. Prospects for children's medicines. 26%

LITERARY TEXT

18. Stories, stories and legends. 100%

19. Sayings, songs and riddles. 100%

22. Poetry. 97%

23. Theatre and dramatization. 90%

24. Comics. 82%

INFORMATION TEXT

25. Newspapers and magazines. 89%

26. Advertising and propaganda. 71%

27. Correspondence (letters). 61%

28. Concept maps. 67%

31. Emails and social networks. 37%

3. THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN READING LEARNING

According to research carried out in 2005 which was published under the title «The reading public in Greece its demographic characteristics and behavior» (Tsourvakas, 2005 there are four major categories of readers in Greece. First are the non-readers who make up a large percentage which ranges between 42.7% and 43.7% in the two public surveys. Non-readers are usually older people, most men with a low level of education. Most of them are retired. One of the main reasons they do not read is the lack of time. Also, they do not like reading in general, they find it boring. A second large category of readers are occasional readers who do not read books regularly but read either for a specific purpose for practical or professional reasons, and generally buy books under the pressure of circumstances (compulsory reading for school, university because it was needed in the profession or for the needs of. home) and not as a positive choice that is part of their lifestyle. This category of readers would also include those who read only some practical books or read during a trip, buy occasionally from supermarkets or stands and who state that they rarely read. The average age in relation to non-readers decreases while their educational and socio-economic level rises. A third category is the book lovers are young 18-34, most of them women live in urban centers and have high education and socio-economic status. They read 1-9 books a year. They often go to bookstores and read both Greek literature and foreign literature, reading is their hobby, they are greatly influenced by fashion, advertising and other media and especially by word of mouth the dissemination of news about the book by word of mouth (relatives or friends) and from the reviews they read. A fourth category is the «bookworms», they are fanatical readers

who read more than ten books a year, reading books is an integral part of their lives, their passion. They usually read special categories of books, they are 8.8% of the population, they are young people, most of them women, highly educated and income, they buy books based on content, they follow the evolution of both the authors who read and the publishing in general activity. They are knowledgeable about the subject, possible and they themselves are the authors of some texts or related to writing or people who write, have an opinion about the book, may belong to a group of readers, may collect some rare editions, the book is an integral part of their lives and their daily lives. They are less interested in the cost of the book than in the quality of its content.

As for the relationship between students and reading, in a survey conducted in 2004-2006 by the Pedagogical Institute on the relationship between students and reading, a total of 28,049 questionnaires were collected, of which 2,803 by philologists and 25,246 by students. To the question «do you read extracurricular literary books?» The students answered 75% «a little» or «not at all», while the positive answers to the same question («a lot») gathered a percentage of 25%. The authors of the research, which of course aim to investigate the teaching of literature in high school, point out that the results of this first question show that "students' literacy is also linked to the educational level of the family, the area of residence and social class" . According to the survey measurements, students in urban areas read more extracurricular literature books than students in working-class (6% difference) and rural students (difference 4.92%). There is also a difference based on gender, since girls appear to respond positively to reading extracurricular books by 32.94%, while boys respond positively by only 17.64%.

The dominance of the image and the ready-made quick information is evident in the students' answers to two specific research questions: «Do you better understand a literary work that you have seen on television or in the cinema? Says the questionnaire and the students answer «yes» at a rate of 65%. And below: "Would you prefer to enrich the course of Literature with technological means (video, CD-Rom)?" the students answered "yes" at a rate of 78%.

What follows is the presentation of the results of the study carried out within the framework of the READCOM project in four categories.

As shown from the following percentages, **the family attitude towards reading** for all the surveyed families is favourable:

- 100% think that reading is not a waste of time and that it helps them solve situations that arise in their daily lives
- 97% enjoy visiting bookstores and libraries
- 89% o not prefer to check videos on the internet nor avoid websites that have a lot of lyrics
- 97% think that reading should be one of people's favourite entertainments
- 90% like to share with the other information that they have read on the internet. books or magazines.
- 87% think that when buying an electrical appliance it is more useful to read the instructions first

In relation to **family attitudes that favor learning to read in their children**, almost all of the surveyed population consider it highly recommended to teach the usefulness of reading while valuing it as an important activity.

Strengths

- 100% think that reading should be an important activity in the family
- 97% think that a book is a good gift for a child
- 92% think that families should dedicate time to read on a weekly basis
- 90% tell or invent stories orally with the child
- 100% think that it is recommended that parents teach their children the usefulness of reading
- 90% find many moments in family life that can be used to teach the child to read (meals. trips. bedtime)
- 82% think that parents are responsible for children learning to read. that's not only for school
- 100% think that the family should help and encourage the child to learn to read
- 84% think that it is advisable for the family to select or recommend educational programs (TV. Mobile, computer) to their children to learn to read
- 95% think that i is important that homes have a space dedicated to the use and care of a family library
- 82% think that it is recommended that the family encourages the correct use of the readings made with the new technologies (computer, mobile, television, etc.

Weaknesses

- 40% participate in reading promotion activities organized by the school

Regarding **family attitudes that affect reading learning through motivating everyday situations**, the results are the following:

Strengths

- 95% read in places where children can see them
- 100% speak to their children about things they have done together.
- 97% pass the pages together with their children
- 100% respond to their child when asked "What does this word mean?"
- 90% do activities with the child to promote love for reading
- 95% sing songs or recite poems. tongue twisters, riddles with the child
- 74% look at and / or select books in a bookstore or a library with the child.

Weaknesses

- 64% play with the child to compose and break down words.
- 50% select software on the phone or tablet to teach the child how to read.
- 42% watch TV children programmes together with the child that teach them to read

As for **activities in the family environment that facilitate reading and writing learning**, the results are the following:

Strengths

- 97% read books with pictures with the child so that s/he interprets the pictures
- 79% read and write notes together with the child
- 82% play with toys that include the alphabet
- 79% play games with syllables chosen by them.
- 90% read aloud product labels. the logo of well-known brands or traffic signs with the child in everyday moments.

- 82% name the images of a book. a website or a place (museum, library,etc) with the child.
- 87% read aloud (a story. the instruction of a toy, a recipe, etc.) with the child.

Weaknesses

- 53% write the shopping list with the child (with icons or with words)
- 44% take advantage of any time during the day to read
- 21% read the TV guide with the child to choose the program to watch

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