

SPECIAL EDITION

IS THERE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE CHILDREN UNDER THREE IN ECEC?

Early childhood education and care in Greece: In search of an identity

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Abstract: Despite the considerable improvements that have taken place in the field of early child care and education services the last two decades in Greece, the availability of such services, especially for children under 3 years of age, continues to be rather limited compared to other European countries. The paper briefly presents a set of issues that are linked to the current situation of ECCE in the country such as a number of socio-cultural elements that outline the connection between family structure and childcare coverage, the types of ECCE arrangements and participation rates, the issue of quality and the major problems linked with this. Finally, the major findings that have been revealed by the few research studies are presented including the link between quality and developmental outcomes.

Keywords: Greece, Early childhood education and care, Research, Policy, Children under 3

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The paper presents the current situation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Greece with particular emphasis to children under 3 and aims to highlight some issues that should be reconsidered in order to overcome various odds in establishing a modern and sustainable system of ECEC services. The paper comprises two parts: in a first part a brief report is made to critical socio-cultural events that determined the development of ECEC services in the country, the types of these services ECEC currently available together with some demographic information and a specific reference to the issue of quality. The second part of the paper presents some significant findings of the limited empirical work undertaken the last two decades in ECEC field

with regard to research for children under 3 years of age. In a final section some critical issues of the current situation of ECEC in Greece are briefly discussed. It is argued that despite the improvements that have taken place lately and the new conditions due to the transfer of day care centres to the decentralized local administration system, the whole context of early care and education provision still suffers from poor regulation and lack of resources; a situation that minimizes the opportunities for sustainable growth due to the recession hit and fiscal crisis that the country is passing through the last three years. In the following sections these issues are outlined.

THE PROVISION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE – SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES

The importance of providing early childhood care is intricately connected to family characteristics, welfare performance and labour-market opportunities. Based on these central features, among a number of others, European countries have been grouped into three clusters/social models: the Scandinavian/Nordic, the Central European and the Southern/Mediterranean cluster (Bettio & Plantenga, 2004). Greece belongs to this latter one.

South European countries (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal) form a separate group in the European Union, sharing a cultural emphasis on the crucial role of mothers' presence and care in early childhood years, strong family ties and a high reliance on the extended family for supporting childcare needs (Saraceno, 2000). Hence, in this vein, four decades ago, it would have been inconceivable for a Greek mother to leave her child in someone else's care. Childcare needs would have been met by a close relative or neighbour, and together they would have formed a "collaborative team" (Doumani, 1990). This has always been a core component of the Greek social structure and a characteristic feature of the family *care regime* (or "familism") prevailing in this country.

In comparison to countries belonging to the other two clusters, further characteristics of countries belonging to the Mediterranean cluster refer to the male breadwinner enjoying higher employment protection and job stability than other labor force groups such as women and migrants; social assistance schemes which are residual; child and elderly care being provided mainly by family; unemployment compensation and vocational training systems which are underdeveloped with welfare-state institutions being relatively undeveloped (Karamessini, 2007, p. 5).

Greece has traversed the phases of development from an agrarian society to that of late modernity in fifty years' time – a much shorter period than other countries of the West. A number of dramatic socio-economic changes have taken place progressively since the early 50s such as increased distance between young parents and their family of origin, increase of divorce rates, the growing numbers of single-parent families, decrease in the number of marriages, decline in birth rates, increase in the number

of cohabitations, one-person households, lone parenthood and reconstituted families, intense urban migration, a migration wave from other nearby countries since the early 90s (Bagavos, 2001). Although there is plenty of research evidence showing that the family unit is still part of a wider network that covers many family needs and contributes actively to everyday life these changes have had important ramifications on the norms, values and ideals structuring family life as well as on the political rhetoric and policy-making regarding family (Dragonas & Tseliou, 2009).

Since 1981 the country of Greece has been a member-state of the European Union. The changes over the last thirty years have been a direct consequence of the European Union's socio-economic policy agenda and the relevant employment strategies which, since 1997, gave priority to the promotion of gender equality in employment that lately was transformed to the so-called "work-family reconciliation policy agenda". The cluster of strategies involved with this agenda have provided even further support for the importance of childcare provision and the availability of European Union's support funds. This has coincided with an intensive effort to extend and improve public childcare services, which has constituted the cornerstone of 'reconciliation policy' in Greece in recent years (Karamessini, 2008, p. 14). In 1997, Greece was the EU-15 Member State with the least developed formal childcare services either publicly or privately funded. Since 1998 a great effort has been undertaken to extend the publicly-funded childcare infrastructure and increase coverage rates by formal childcare services (Karamessini, 2008, p. 2). However, despite the considerable improvements that have taken place, public childcare services, especially for children under 3 years, still are not considered enough to fulfil the demand.

THE TYPES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION SERVICES

The variety of early child care and education arrangements is rather limited compared to other European countries. More specifically, grandparents remain by far the most common form of alternative "low or at no cost" in-home care (the highest rate in the EU-27; Karamessini, 2008, p. 6). There are two other potential alternatives for parents: (a) "babysitting"/"child-sit-

ting” in the child's own home and (b) out-of-home group-based forms of care and education such as nurseries/crèches¹ and kindergartens/pre-primary schools². The former can be difficult and frustrating because it is temporary, changeable, and expensive with no officially approved system or registration for babysitters. Many of them are unskilled, low-paid immigrant women hired to combine informal children's care with the performance of domestic chores (Bagavos, 2004).

With regard to the extra-familial structures there are two basic types of early child care and education institutions, either within the private or public sector, which are typical of a “divisional system” (split model), that is seen in other countries as well.

(a) *Early childhood education*, represented by kindergarten programs (*nipiagogeion*), are the first formal pre-primary educational stage which provide services for children 4 to 6 years of age. Since 2006 this has become compulsory for children ages 5 and 6. These settings, either in the private or the public sector, are supervised by the Ministry of Education and provide exclusively educational services based on a newly introduced national curriculum which places particular emphasis on an interdisciplinary and thematic approach to teaching. Those kindergartens with standard schedules operate between 8:00-12:30 pm and the “whole-day” kindergarten program operate until 4:00 pm. Since 1988 the kindergarten teachers employed by these programs have been graduates from one of the 8 university departments of preschool education in the country.

(b) *Early childhood care* is represented only by “day care centres”/nurseries (*pedikos* and/or *vrephonipiakos stathmos*). There are currently no other type of group-based child care provision often seen in other European countries such as childminders or family day care, au pairs, playgroups, or organized family care etc.. The day care centres are run mainly by the private and the public (through municipalities) sector

and provide their services (with minor variations depending on the provider and the sector) to children between the ages of 2 months (or 7 months for the public sector nurseries) and up to 5 years old. For the group of children 4 years old parents may choose to register their child either at a day care centre or at a kindergarten. Although a number of private sector's day care centres are licensed to have kindergarten classes this is not the case for the municipal nurseries.

Within nurseries children are in most cases divided into mixed gender and separate age groups. Nurseries traditionally offer custodial care with some education services (depending on the case) for up to 8-9 hours a day, five days a week. They have mixed educational personnel including nurses, teachers, nursery assistants, and kindergarten teachers. The head teachers have almost exclusively administrative tasks and duties. Depending on the case their supervision comes under the Ministry of Interior (the municipalities' centres), Health and Welfare (concerning the licensing of the private day care centres) or the Ministry of Education (for the case of licensing of the kindergarten classes). In the nursery both nurses and teachers are typically graduates of one of the three relevant departments of Higher Technological Institutes around the country whereas nursery nurse's assistants normally hold a post-secondary education college diploma following a two-year training course. *Vrephonipiakos stathmos* [infants' (*vrephi*) and toddlers' (*nipia*) centre/nursery] provide principally nursery care and education services for children from as young as 2-3 months (or 7 months for the broader public sector nurseries) up to 2½-3 years of age. *Pedikos stathmos* [children's (*pedia*) centre/nursery] is a similar form of care for children aged from 2½-3 years old up to compulsory school age (at the year of their 6th birthdays) providing early childhood care and education services. There are also nursery structures for both age groups.

The history of these two types of nurseries began in the 1830s with the charitable formation of orphanages. A new era for public sector's day-care centres began in 1997, and gradually grew until 2004 when the former state nurseries and all operating public nurseries were transferred from the Ministry of Health and Welfare to local authorities (municipalities) in an attempt to decentralise the administrative system and engage local communities. Apart from municipalities, nurseries are provided by the private

1. The terms ‘nursery’, ‘crèche’, ‘day care centre’ are used as synonyms and interchangeably in the English language relevant literature concerning the ECCE system in Greece. In the same vein we use the terms ‘kindergarten’ and ‘pre-primary school/class’.

2. No other forms of child care (e.g. childminders or family day care, au pairs, playgroups, or organized family care etc.) exist on any significant scale.

sector, company/employee unions, and non-governmental organizations.

The participation rates

The prevalence of the above mentioned *family care model* signifies that Greek families view of 'out-door care' for children aged less than 3 years and daycare centres tend to be unpopular in public opinion. Based mainly on the records of the OECD (2001, 2006) and the European Commission's (2009) EU-SILC data (see also

Karamessini, 2008; Matsaganis, 2010) of the last decade (see Table 1) it seems that despite some improvements underprovision of formal centre-based childcare is still a problem for all preschool age groups. More specifically, the formal childcare services (public and private) for children under 3 years old increased from 3% in 2001 to 7% in 2003 whereas for children aged from 3 years to mandatory school age (6 years) the participation rate reached 47% in 2003 (from 46% in 2001).

Table 1. Children's participation rates in ECEC arrangements

Age group	Formal centre-based care			Parents only	Grandparents, relatives, friends and child-sitters
	2001 ⁽¹⁾	2003 ⁽²⁾	2006 ⁽³⁾	2006 ⁽³⁾	2006 ⁽³⁾
3 years <	3%	7%	10%	40%	50%
3–6 years	46%	47%	60%	18%	22%

(1) OECD (2001), (2) OECD (2006), (3) European Commission (2009)

The figures reported here are based on estimations from various resources since there is no official agency/bureau in the field

Based on the use of services available for 2006 (European Commission, 2009) only 10% of children aged under 3 years were cared for by formal childcare arrangements. In the EU-27, only Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and Malta displayed lower coverage rates than Greece. In addition, because grandparents play a very important role in childcare, Greece also belongs to the EU countries with a medium-level proportion of children looked after only by their parents. The respective rates for children aged 0-2 and 3-6 years cared for by grandparents has risen to 41% and 18%.

Thus, it could be argued that limited availability of care services for children aged 0-2 cannot be only explained by the lack of responsiveness of policy-makers to changing needs but also equally by unfavourable social attitudes.

The issue of quality

Despite the improvements that have been made in the last decade due to European Union's funding schemes that supported the European employment strategies, it seems that in Greece the matter of "high quality" is a notion under ques-

tion (Petrogiannis, 2006). There are some issues that support this view:

Even the term "quality" is scarcely met in the relevant legislative texts. The preferred term is typically "operational standards," and these are referred principally to premises, the staff employed, its tasks and qualifications, the child/staff ratio, conditions of hygiene, safety and feeding requirements. There is no mention to pedagogical/educational or curricular activities and guidelines.

The Greek state's effort, since 1998, to extend publicly-funded childcare infrastructure has run in parallel with the decentralization of the system by transferring all public day care centres to local authorities. However, this move produced heterogeneity in provision of public childcare with local discrepancies in the level of fees, the conditions of access and the quality of services provided by publicly-funded childcare structures.

The understaffed prefectural bureaus that are responsible for approving the foundation and issuing the operation permits for the private daycare centres and the absence of an inspection mechanism for public childcare services makes it

impossible to control the quality of services provided.

Another reason to support the above argument is that research in early childhood education in particular is at an “embryonic” level, and the limited empirical studies that have been carried out did so with limited financial resources (Chatzidimos, 2002). Hence, policy makers, at both the national and local authority level, who hope to base changes in early childhood care and education on relevant research that indicates how service provision could work to optimise child development are looking for evidence that scarcely exists.

RESEARCH ON GREEK EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE CONTEXT

International research findings about the effects of child care on children’s development can be considered under three broad headings: quality, type of care, and amount or timing of care. These have been found to be the most consistent factors linked with a child’s functioning within a child care program, the concurrent functioning of the child in other contexts, and long term developmental outcomes.

Within the European Union there is recognition of the importance of high quality early years care and education across the Member States for children’s growth, learning and development (e.g. Barnett, 2008), especially for those from deprived environments (e.g. Melhuish, 2004). However, only a few of these states make the link between provision of preschool services and the quality of those services (Eurochild, 2007).

In Greece, with regard to research for children under 3 years of age in ECCE, the issue of quality has been only marginally researched. The lack of available information on the quality of child-care services has been widely documented (Papathanassiou, 1997; Papaprokopiou, 2003; Petrogiannis, 1995, 2001; Mantziou, 2001; Municipality of Athens, 1998). The relevant research remains an underdeveloped area receiving neither adequate encouragement nor support.

The few research studies (for a review see Petrogiannis, 2010) conducted from the late 1980s (Tsiantis et al., 1988, 1991; Dragonas et al., 1995; Lambidi & Polemi-Todoulou, 1992a,b), through the mid 1990s (Petrogiannis, 1995; Petrogiannis & Melhuish, 1996), early

2000s (Mantziou, 2001; Tsakiri, 1999), until recently (Rentzou, 2010; Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2010) converge on certain long-lasting findings, namely:

- There are differences between the nurseries run by the various sectors.
- On average there is a low to medium level of quality as assessed by “global” quality measures (e.g. ECERS).
- There remains insufficient space and the lack of appropriate buildings to provide services.
- There is a greater emphasis to the minding routines, cleanliness, safety, and nutrition in particular.
- There are problematic group sizes and children/educators ratios. This issue may be related to another piece of evidence: early childhood educators tend to be positive, but at the same time often exhibit an “authoritative” style while interacting with children, most likely in an effort to maintain the control of the group (see also Papaprokopiou, 2003).

Parents’ and nursery teachers’ perceptions and involvement

Nursery teachers make complaints for various problems such as the low adult to child ratio and the grouping of children into one single class regardless of age, and mostly, for staff shortages (Papaprokopiou, 1989; Papathanassiou, 1997; Tsakiri, 1999).

Another interesting finding is the limited participation of parents in the child care centres’ everyday activities except from special occasions (e.g., during Christmas or Easter), although differences depend heavily on sector and the type of the centre. However, it seems quite apparent that parents’ interests tend to be restricted to matters of children’s safety and nutrition rather than to educational issues, despite the fact that they generally expect the provision of both care and education services.

It has been suggested (Papaprokopiou, 2003), that due to this limited parental involvement, the nursery teachers experience an “isolated routine” that helps neither parent nor child. In Papaprokopiou’s study (2003), nursery teachers reporting feeling as though parents were not interested in their child’s care and education. In another study (Tsakiri, 1999) parents showed that they were keen to cooperate with nurseries, although their interest was mostly confined to questions about whether their

child “did eat or not in the nursery [...] nothing else”.

Other studies have revealed similar findings suggesting that parents collaborate with nursery staff only when it concerns the health and well-being of their child. These findings also indicate that they do not usually collaborate in, or question, their child’s educational experiences. When parents were asked to name important factors in early childhood services, such as “interpersonal relationships between child and teacher”, parents appeared to place less importance on “recreation” and “collaboration with parents”, confirming the earlier findings (Papaprokopiou, 2003). Laloumi-Vidali’s study (1998) indicated that parents are most willing to collaborate with early childhood professionals about aspects of childhood care rather than education, even though it has been shown that parents expect preschool children to have access to combined early childhood care and education facilities which would reflect a more holistic, integrated approach to early childhood services. Finally, with regard to their needs, both parents and teachers saw the training of staff as a high priority (Tsakiri, 1999) where innovative educational interventions seem to have a positive effect.

Quality and developmental outcomes

With regard to the potential relationship between children’s experiences from the early childhood care and education settings with their development, a number of interesting findings have been revealed from the few studies that exist. When both day care and family characteristics are used to predict children’s development, the combination explains more of the variance in a child’s behaviour than either day care or family characteristics alone (Howes & Stewart, 1987). Following this line of thought Petropoulos (1995) conducted a study with 123 children, 60 with, and 63 without nursery care experience. He focused on their individual characteristics and on structural, contextual and process aspects of both home and day care environments. The findings suggested that there were consistent effects of both caregiving environments on language and on social-emotional development. Home cared children had higher cognitive and linguistic scores, but were more excitable when interacting with the female researcher, which is understandable given the wider social experience of the day care children.

When considering only the group-cared children, it was found that the day care history of the child, the overall quality of the in-home environment, and the overall quality of the out-of-home environment, were correlated with aspects of cognitive and language development. How the mother understood and approached the maternal role was also critical for the social development of this group.

More recently Mantziou (2001), based on the theoretical work of Torrance (1972), studied the effects of nursery organization by looking at different types of educational activities and measuring the quality of early childcare by recording the way children ask questions. These questions were usually characterized as either “identification” questions which focus on a more superficial gathering and labeling of information and experience (e.g., “what is this?”), “substantial/transformational” questions that require more advanced levels of thought and analytical processes, reflecting and enhancing children’s autonomous learning (e.g., “why we look far with the binoculars?”), or “routine/procedural” questions (e.g., “where is the scissor?”, “what colour shall I use for the house, white or brown?”). The study was carried out in a northwestern town in Greece, using a semi-experimental design sampling 17 day nurseries with a total of 70 children between the ages of 4½-5½ years old. The findings revealed that positive teaching behaviour and higher quality care provokes children into asking more *substantial* questions. Children in lower quality care were more likely to ask *identification* questions. According to the researcher, the children in lower quality care asked a limited number of substantial questions because: the “climate” of the classroom did not promote interaction between the children; nursery teachers used an “authoritative” style to control children’s behaviour (a finding that agrees with earlier research findings Papaprokopiou, 2003); nursery teachers displayed a lack of the appropriate pedagogical knowledge and techniques needed to provoke different kinds of questions; nursery teachers had low expectations of the children’s questioning abilities.

Finally, other studies with toddlers have focused on physical, cognitive and social development (e.g. the effects of computers on the behaviour of young children) as well as on medical issues.

EPILOGUE

Despite a number of changes and some improvements (i.e. legislation, transfer of responsibilities) that have aimed at supporting working families with very young children, early childcare services have not developed and there is still a substantial lack of services in these areas. Both the government and local authorities attribute this poor regulation and inspection of childcare services to an absence of trained personnel in staff supervisory bodies (Foskolos, 2001). Overall, it could be argued that the whole system of early care and education provision still suffers from haphazard design, poor regulation and that the lack of resources available is indicative of the low priority given to these structures. The new decentralized local administration system must look into the issue of early child care and education philosophy afresh and improve the level of care provided. There are several ways this can be accomplished, namely:

- by introducing quality standards, evaluation procedures and constant inspection mechanisms,
- by developing curriculum guidelines based on research,
- by offering continuous in-service training for all educators and
- by promoting good relations between services, parents and local communities.

A presupposition is adequate funding – a difficult issue since the Greek economy has entered an orbit of hard recession due to fiscal and debt crisis. Given the current cuts and delays in the disbursement of tax revenues to local authorities by the central state, the future of public childcare services depends on the intensity of social pressure to preserve and extend the existing infrastructure and service capacity and improve the quality of services without undermining their affordability through great increases in fees.

With regard to younger children (less than 3 years) the extremely limited number of studies has been focused on cognitive and social development issues (e.g. the effects of television on the behavior of young children) as well as on medical issues. The few Greek studies that have been conducted in this area, indicate that further research is needed to determine the developmental consequences of children's experiences in

Greek early childhood care and education institutions, both public and private, especially for those under 3 years of age. It appears that systematic research may offer a new opportunity for sustainable growth and balanced change in the early childhood care and educational system of Greece "as it struggles to integrate with the global system while preserving those salient elements of an old and remarkably enduring legacy" (Evangelou & Dafermou, 2005, p. 134). The whole early childhood care and education system must be worked out in a systematic way, with clear targets. It must be adapted to current conditions in order to provide developmentally and educationally appropriate experiences, and match the needs, provision and outcomes for children.

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