System of early education/care and professionalisation in **Greece**

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PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN GREECE[1]

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS ARTICLE		and their Greek equivalents
AUTH	Aristotle University of Thessaloniki	(ΑΠΘ)
CTCF	Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework	(ΔΕΠΠΣ)
DASC	Diagnosis, Assessment and Support Centers	(ΚΔΑΥ)
ERC	Educational Research Center	(ΚΕΕ)
HITE	Higher Institutions of Technological Education	(ΑΤΕΙ)
MNERA	Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs	(ΥΠΕΠΘ)
MTTC	"Maráslion" Teacher-Training Center	(ΜΔΔΕ)
NSSG	National Statistical Service of Greece	(ΕΣΥΕ)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development	(ΟΟΣΑ)
PHAPE	Pan-Hellenic Association of Preschool Educators	(ΠΑΣΥΒΝ)
PI	Pedagogical Institute	(Π.Ι.)
RFTC	Regional Further-Training Centers	(ΠΕΚ)
SBSS	Supreme Board of Staff Selection	(ΑΣΕΠ)
STVI	Secondary Technical and Vocational Institutions	(ΤΕΕ)
TCPET	Training Centers for Primary Education Teachers	(ΣΕΛΔΕ)
UDKT	University Departments for Kindergarten Teachers	(ΠΤΝ)
WOECE	World Organization for Early Childhood Education	(ΠΟΠΑΕ; French & Spanish: ΟΜΕΡ)

The Development of Preschool Education in Greece

The institution of preschool education has been developing noticeably slow in Greece since its first beginnings in the early 1830s, a fact which must be attributed to a number of interacting factors, including the political and ethnic instability of the region due to frequent wars which have been leading to inflows and outflows of refugees, the rather delayed industrialization of the country, the scarcity of women in most professional arenas, as well as a marked lack of information regarding research findings on the importance of preschool education, to mention just a few (Doliopoulou, 2000). Thanks to the honest endeavors of a few foreign missionaries, however, preschool education was triggered early enough on this frontier of Europe.

In 1831, on the Cycladic island of Syros, the German missionary August Frederik Hildner was the first to set up an informal group-schooling establishment for two- to six-year-olds. During the same year in Athens, a private school was founded by the American missionary couple Mr. and Mrs. Hill, which provided education for children aged two to eight. 1872 saw the establishment of

[1] Our warm acknowledgements go to **Hará Rizou**, postgraduate student of the Department of Preschool Education of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, for being so valuably helpful in collecting information for this article.

another school in Athens, which provided toddlers and young children with free education and use of facilities, while at the same time, many makeshift kindergartens were starting to pop up, scattered all over the country (Doliopoulou, 2000). The official recognition and the institutionalization of preschool education in Greece, however, is really owed to one person, Ekaterini Laskaridou, whose action towards that direction began in 1864, from the position of the director of the Hill school in Athens (Doliopoulou, 2000).

Still, although the term "nipiagogio" (meaning "kindergarten", but not verbatim) had already been coined in 1865, nowhere in the new constitution of Greece was to be found any reference to this or to any notion of preschool education, up until 1895, when a whole generation of systematic efforts on Ms. Laskaridou's part finally bore fruit, and a law was passed that recognized the provision of nursery education in independent institutions for children aged three to six (Kitsarás, 1997); moreover, the first official syllabus that was compiled in 1896, was based solely on the ideas she had put forward. A year later –in 1897, sixty years after the German educator Friedrich Froebel had founded the first "kindergarten" in Blankenburg, Prussia (now part of Germany)– Laskaridou established the first kindergarten in Athens based on Froebelian principles, which she named "nipiakós kípos" (verbatim "children's garden" in Greek) (Zaharenákis, 1996). At the dawn of the 20th century, most recognized kindergartens were independent institutions in the large urban centers of Greece; only in a few cases they were based on the initiative of local administrative authorities.

In 1901, the day care center movement began in Greece, again on Ms. Laskaridou's initiative, with the opening of the first day care center in Athens. Within a relatively short period, child-care centers were opened by many individuals and associations, under such names as "garden of children", "children's shelter", "infant and toddler-care center", "children's nest", "children's home" and so on. The Greek state officially recognized the institution of day care centers in 1926, and initiated a trial period with a small number of public establishments (Haritos, 1998).

Another significant milestone for preschool education in our country was the law that was passed in 1929, thanks to which kindergartens were at last integrated in primary education with a two-year attendance period, and they came under the Ministry of Education, which gave out guidelines concerning the number of children assigned to each educator, the goals of preschool education and how to achieve them. In those days, day care centers in Greece generally promoted the physical growth, intellectual development and social skills of children through simple and enjoyable activities and exercises, and they provided children with an academic foundation for elementary school (Doliopoulou, 2000).

The first official curriculum for the Greek kindergarten was designed in 1962, and from that year on, day care centers in Greece started to flourish. This curriculum remained until 1980, when it was modified; its successor was designed in 1989 and is still in use, together with the newest of 2002, known as Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework (henceforth CTCF). We will come back to this later.

The Structure and Function of Preschool Education in Greece

Preschool education in Greece, for children aged three to six years old, is provided: (a) in public and in private kindergartens, which are part of the first level of the national educational system, that is primary education, and (b) in public (municipal) and in private day care centers which provide care and education for the children of working parents (Zaharenákis, 1996). Attendance in all public kindergartens, as well in some municipal day-care centres (depending on the municipality) is officially free, yet it is well known that significant burdens –regarding mainly operational costs– are often laid on the parents unofficially. As for the rest of the public day care centers, fees are determined in proportion to the parents' income, whereas private kindergartens charge their services on the basis of fixed scales which are constantly revised by the Board of Trade.

Kindergartens under the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs [henceforth MNERA] accept children from ages four to six; municipal day care centers for (i) infants and (ii) young children accept children from ages (i) three months to six years and (ii) two and a half to six, respectively; finally, private day care centers for (iii) infants and (iv) young children accept children from ages (iii) 40 days to six years and (iv) two and a half to six, respectively.

Kindergartens

The aim of kindergarten education in Greece, according to the law in force, is to promote the children's physical, emotional, intellectual and social development, in accordance with the aims of the broader framework of primary and secondary education. Next to the family environment which is the first decisive factor in a child's development, the kindergarten's aim is not only to smoothly initiate children into the school system, but also to foster relationships with their peers in a supportive and stimulating environment that will prepare their successful integration in society (Pedagogical Institute [henceforth PI], MNERA, 2002a).

More specifically, the kindergarten should encourage children to sharpen their senses through creative play, it should help them learn how to organize their thoughts, coordinate their actions to achieve results, enrich their experience through their physical and social environment, and start recognizing its dynamics. Children are introduced to the symbolic nature of language, mathematics, and art by getting acquainted with the alphabet, numbers and colors. Kindergartens should also strive to offer children a foundation for the development of social skills by motivating them to interact with their peers and engage in interpersonal relationships, and to develop a sound sense of self-confidence by showing them how to take initiatives freely and unhurriedly in an organized environment which can function as a model of society at large.

Kindergarten attendance is not yet compulsory in all regions of Greece. Even though an act of 1985 concerning preschool education did contain an article which was proclaiming kindergarten attendance as gradually becoming compulsory in many regions of the country through a joint action of three ministries (of National Education and Religious Affairs, of Health, Welfare and Social Security, and of Finance), this ministerial bill was never enacted.

As far as their capacity is concerned, kindergartens are distinguished in two categories, according to the law in force; namely (a) those with one and (b) those with two teaching positions, which can accommodate (a) seven to thirty and (b) thirty-one to sixty children, respectively. Thus in both cases, the maximum teacher-student ratio remains one to thirty. The age range for acceptance is four to six, and the attendance lasts two years. Classes are usually mixed, and different ages are not separated, except when some projects require the formation of workgroups by age (e.g. the Eurydice Project, 1995).

Every public kindergarten belongs in a certain school district and accepts children who are resident there. In municipalities with more than one kindergartens, the decision as to where each is to be assigned, is taken by the director of the local office for education after he/she has taken into account the suggestions of the Municipal Board of Education and of the kindergarten directors (Presidential Decree, 1998). There are also some kindergartens which are housed in the same building and belong in the same district with an elementary school, but each institution in these cases is nevertheless administratively autonomous.

The school year for the educators begins on September 1 and ends on August 31 of the following year, whereas the curricular year covers the period between September 1 and June 21, of which September 11 – June 15 is the actual attendance period of the preschoolers. Regular kindergartens are open 20 hours per week, that is from 8:30 to 12:45 every working day for the educators, and from 9:00 to 12:30 for the children, while the growing need to care for children of working parents has also led to the establishment of full-day kindergartens.

The first unofficial attempt to set up a few such stations for the children to be creatively occupied was made in 1985. The institutionalization of full-day kindergartens began during the

academic year 1997-98 with 160 establishments, while their number has been constantly increasing ever since, according to the demands of the parents. The academic year 2003-04 saw the opening of approximately 2000 such kindergartens, which corresponded to one third of the total number of them. The aim of these full-day kindergartens, apart from providing an indispensable service to working parents, is to upgrade preschool education in terms of a more complete preparation of children for elementary school, and to help reinforce the role of social welfare by means of ameliorating social conditions among the children in an environment where background differences are made less prominent (Doliopoulou, 2003).

Full-day kindergartens are open from 8:00 to 16:00 and are daily managed by two kindergarten teachers, with a 4-hour shift for each educator (8:00 to 12:00 and 12:00 to 16:00, respectively); they both meet at noon, between 11:45 and 12:00, in order to consult each other and to design or adapt their programs. As for the children, there is only one group of them, attending these kindergartens from 8:00 in the morning, straight to 3:45 in the afternoon. In order for a child to be accepted in a full-day kindergarten, his/her parents must unquestioningly respect its working-hours, as it is pedagogically wrong and emotionally upsetting for such a young child to be snatched away from its social group (Doliopoulou, 2003).

The subject matters taught, as well as the teaching approaches and techniques applied, remain the same throughout the day (the second-shift program is a continuation of the first-shift). The program includes free-choice and organized activities, as long as a break for lunch and a 30-minute rest or nap for the children. The program of the second shift is more flexible, and it is shaped through the cooperation of the kindergarten teacher with an expert counselor for preschool education, depending on the conditions and facilities of the kindergarten, as well as on the number of students attending it.

The educational policy regarding kindergartens is a task of the government in power, and is integrated in the larger framework of legislation for all levels of education. The initial design and the implementation of educational policies, which must be authorized by the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers, as well as the administrative responsibility of the whole educational system in all departments, offices and levels, is a task of the Minister of National Education and Religious Affairs. He/She discusses all written proposals for new educational laws with his advisors, and he/she is held accountable for the proposals voted upon by the members of the Ministry (ERC, 2003).

Day care centers

Up until 2001, day care centers were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Social Security, which is part of the central government, and then they were appointed to the municipalities of their districts.

As far as the various age groups in day care centers are concerned, there are quite a few additions to be made to the aforementioned distinctions, so for the ages I will use arabic numerals for the sake of a clearer overview. I. day care centers for infants and toddlers (“vrefikí stathmí”) accept children from ages 3 months to 2,5 years, which are divided in two categories: (a) 3 months to 1,5 years, and (b) 1,5 – 2,5; II. day care centers for young children (“pedikí stathmí”) accept children from ages 2,5 – 6 (compulsory education begins at 6), which are divided in three categories: (a) 2,5 – 3,5, (b) 3,5 – 4,5, and (c) 4,5 – 6, and III. day care centers for infants, toddlers and young children (“vrefonipiakí stathmí”) accept children from ages 3 months to 6 years (categorized as above). Some municipal day care centers accept even infants from the age of 40 days (as has also been aforementioned; see last par. of 2., just before section 2a.), and accommodate them in groups of twelve, with two supervising educators and one assistant, while each nursery class for young children (see II. in this par.) accepts a maximum of 25 children and their care is assigned to one educator and one assistant.

The school year for the day care centers begins on September 1 and ends on July 31 of the following year. In regions where summer is the high season of the parents' occupations, day care centers can remain open even during August, otherwise they are closed for this month. Working hours during the winter and spring are 7:00 to 16:00, and during the summer and autumn 6:45 to 16:00.

The children registered in any day care center are usually those residing in the local district of their municipality. Priority for registration is given not only to children of working parents or to those from families with many children, but also to orphans, to those from needy or single-parent families, to children of unmarried mothers, of divorced or separated parents, of parents with physical or mental disabilities, and so on. The board of directors of each center, together with members of the municipality, can decide to charge some monthly fees according to the financial condition of the families of the children.

- According to a regulation of 2002, the objectives of day care centers are as follows:
- To provide a unified form of preschool education based on the latest research findings.
- To promote the children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development.
- To smooth out as far as possible any differences among the children resulting from their parents' cultural, economic, and educational background.
- To relieve working parents while at the same time raising awareness on issues of modern pedagogy and psychology.
- To facilitate the preschoolers' transition from the family- to the school environment.
- To daily provide children with care and nutrition, complying with all hygiene- and safety regulations.

Day care centers run a daily program of creative occupation, which encourages a balanced development of the children's body and mind, helps them to relate to each other and promotes their socialization, while making sure that they feel safe and free. Finally, all day care centers provide infants, toddlers and young children with the appropriate amount of quality food, and some provide even transportation from- and back to their homes.

Leaves for Parents

Greece today is faced with a rapidly changing social situation, as most mothers of younger than 10-year-old children are occupied outside the house (however, we still have no statistics on the occupations of parents with children aged 0-6). For this reason, regulations have been made concerning the periods of permitted absence from their jobs for parents or future parents. Pregnant women who have no choice but to go through prenatal controls and examinations during their working hours, get leaves with no cutbacks on their salaries.

Also, the marriage leave is five working days for those with five-day workweeks, and six days for those with six-day workweeks. The father gets a paid paternity leave for two days, while the working mother gets a 17-week-long maternity leave: four months before delivery, and an extra week after (which was added with a relatively recent amendment).

As far as the child-raising leave is concerned, according to the relevant law of 1998, the following regulation is in force: each of the parents, as long as he/she has been employed under the same employer for at least a year, is entitled to an unpaid 3,5-month-long child-raising leave, which, theoretically, he/she can take at any time after the end of the maternity leave and before their child reaches the age of 3,5. The exact timing of the leave is decided by the employer who takes into account the priorities of the rest of his employees.

Working parents who have adopted a child, have the same rights. In case of successive childbirths (or adoptions), the parents retain their right to take the same leaves for each new member of their family, provided that after the previous leave, there has passed at least one full year of regular employment under the same employer. If both parents work in the same business or

office and are on the same level of priority for their employer, they themselves have to reach a common decision as to how and for how long each of them will take his/her leave. In cases of separation, divorce, widowhood or extramarital childbirth, the parent who has the custody of the child is entitled to a six-month-long leave maximum.

Moreover, there is a daily hour-long permission of absence from work for a working mother: for a period of 30 months after the end of her maternity leave, she has the right to come to work one hour later, or to leave one hour earlier. Alternatively, if it suits her employer's schedules, she can choose to take a daily two-hour-long permission of absence for the first 12 months, and hour-long permissions for the remaining 6 months. If she does not exercise these rights of hers, the father is equally entitled to them, as long as he brings to his employer the relevant attestation of his wife's employer. Unmarried parents, as well as foster parents of no more than six-year-old children, are entitled to the same permissions, with the starting point for foster parents being the day of adoption.

Employed parents can also leave from work in order to consult their children's teachers on their progress in primary- or secondary-education schools, until their children reach the age of sixteen. One parent at a time has the right to leave for a few hours each time or even skip a whole weekday, as long as they don't exceed the limit of a total of four weekdays per year together.

Finally, a widow, a widower, or an unmarried parent who is employed and has the custody of a child, is entitled to a paid leave of six weekdays per year, regardless of the duration of any other leaves he/she is entitled to, whereas a parent with three or more children is entitled to a paid leave of eight weekdays per year, until his/her youngest child reaches the age of twelve, as long as these days –whether taken all together or separately– do not coincide with the beginning or the end of his/her yearly regular leave (www.ypakp.gr).

Day-care Centers and Extracurricular Activities

If you ask any Greek above thirty how a typical household looked like just a few decades ago even in our largest urban centers, you'll get more or less the same answer: the house was always full of people. People coming, people going, children chirping, grannies and grandpas trying to get after them. Such was the state of affairs, that the parents had no choice but to let their parents share the upbringing of the third generation living under the same roof. "Those were the days!", some may still say. But times have changed; even in the remotest parts of this country, the extended family culture has almost disappeared, and most parents now have no choice but to entrust their offspring to various institutions, where the experts can keep them busy, happy and boost their socialization process through a multidimensional interaction with their peers.

During the last years, the Greek state has been making considerable efforts to cater for working parents and their children. The institution of public full-day kindergartens and day care centers is a reality; even sucklings are admitted in some private day-care centers. However, four o'clock in the afternoon is far from closing time for many offices and businesses, and those parents that must remain away from home, have to hire baby-sitters to pick up their children and provide them with another form of education. Finally, it is worth noting that some municipalities for some years now have been providing a free alternative to this: the so-called "centers for creative occupation" which open in the afternoon and give children the opportunity and the materials to draw, play, and express themselves in various ways.

Official Curricula – Educational Reforms

Many educational reforms have been carried into effect during these last years in Greece, which have changed the structure of education and have brought forward new curricula. The two aforementioned reforms concerning kindergartens took place in 1980 and in 1989, respectively; the second, which is still in use, defines the aim of kindergarten education as the facilitation of the preschoolers' balanced and holistic development in the psycho-motor, the cognitive, the affective, the social, and the moral domains, in an atmosphere of freedom, safety and inspiration (Kitsarás, 2004).

The subsequent reform of 2002 changed the face of Greek education and has been shaping a new reality. The PI of the MNERA brought forward a new curriculum, the unified CTCF (PI-MNERA, 2002a), which was designed in order to cover the arising social and scientific needs. It is a project of internal reform, based on pedagogical principles and methods which aim at a significant upgrade of the provided education (Lióliou, 2002).

The CTCF is based on two axes: the preservation of the independence of autonomous and self-inclusive subject matters on the one hand, and a striving to fundamentally unify all knowledge on the other; in other words, to highlight the links among autonomous subject matters. A "unified" character is promoted within and among all levels of education (Kitsarás, 2004). Within the scope of the CTCF fall the cross-thematic approach to knowledge, the development of projects, the teaching based on collaborative learning, the encouragement of a form of learning based on research and critical thought, a raising of collective awareness as far as the social and organizational context of the school is concerned, an enhancement of the autonomy of educators and the curricular autonomy of the school unit, a remodeling of the dominant school culture and a bridging over to the immediate social environment. Flexibility of choice on all levels is the key word: thematics, methodology, media, resources, roles of educators and students, involvement of communal organizations and services, presentation of results, etc. (PI-MNERA, 2002b).

Preschool education, according to the CTCF, should also strive to be as cross-thematic as possible, accentuating the common foundation of subject matters, activities, and goals, which hints at the realizability of a unified field of knowledge. The kindergarten becomes an integral part of primary education and its planning. As far as content is concerned, the CTCF promotes the following subject matters to be taught: (a) language (reading and writing), (b) mathematics, (c) environmental studies (regarding natural and anthropogenic environments), (d) free expression and creativity (art, drama, music, physical education), and (e) computer science. For each science or subject matter, specific target skills are mentioned, and some exemplary cross-thematic activities are suggested for preschoolers. Of course, the educator can design his/her own activities based on the interests of the children, and should elicit even more ones from them.

The first trial implementation of the CTCF took place during the academic year 2001-02. 2003-04 was originally set as the academic year for its official implementation in all kindergartens of the country, which never took place, due to the change of government in March 2004. So its implementation was left to the judgment of kindergarten teachers, while in 2005-06 the MNERA issued a circular defining as official curriculum of the kindergarten a combination of the one of 1989 and the CTCF.

These curricula are in force both in public (regular and full-day) and in private kindergartens in Greece. For day care centers, on the other hand, no law has yet enacted any official curriculum, but many of them implement one that was issued in 1993 by the Pan-Hellenic Association of Preschool Educators (henceforth PHAPE), which is entitled: "The basic principles of planning and providing preschool education" (Zakopoulou, Kakaroglou & Kosma, 2001). This curriculum is divided in five age-appropriate programs (for babies aged 3 – 18 months, and for children 18 months – 2 years, 2 – 3, 3 – 4, and 4 – 6 years). Each program is defined on a four-columned table, each of which presents (a) the characteristics of each age-group, (b) the educational aims, (c) ways to organize facilities and materials, and (d) the age-appropriate subject matters, pedagogical activities, and projects which are considered necessary for each group to

achieve its objectives. It is explicitly pointed out that these tables are by no means to substitute for a comprehensive curriculum; their aim is simply to provide a few guidelines concerning the method of curriculum planning, and they are only indicative as far as age-group characteristics, organizing facilities and materials, and aims and activities are concerned (PHAPE, 2001).

The Transition to Elementary School

The role of the kindergarten as a bridge to elementary school is very important. Education here should aim at a smooth and effortless transformation of the preschooler to a schoolchild. No statistics are available on the number of children who cannot make this transition smoothly in Greece, whereas no volume of the legislation of our educational system includes any mention to cases of delayed entry into compulsory education, repetition of the first class, or entry of pupils into special schools (Kitsarás, 1997). Only public-kindergarten curricula include a short mention to this issue, by suggesting that children would benefit from visiting the facilities of their future elementary school and by getting acquainted with its environment before actually becoming students there.

To a large degree, the smoothness of this transition depends on the sensibility, the attitude, and the educational background of the educators. The cooperation between preschool and elementary-school institutions is not a frequent phenomenon, especially in those cases when they are not housed in the same building; but even when they are, it doesn't seem to make any difference (Zaharenákis, 1996). Thanks to the CTCF, a positive step is taken in this direction; knowledge is unified and the transition to elementary school is facilitated. Moreover, all university departments of preschool education include in their syllabi courses on this transition and its importance for the children, so that future kindergarten teachers are equipped with the methodological tools to facilitate it.

Cooperation with the Parents

The importance of cooperation between parents and kindergarten teachers has been going about a lot during the last years. Still, Greek legislation does not provide any support for such a cooperation; kindergarten teachers are neither obliged to cooperate, nor are they officially protected in case of a parent's irrational involvement. Criticism is seldom constructive in this context, and as a result, there is a communication gap between school and family, whereas most teachers for their part make no particular bridging attempts; the occasional achievement of a meaningful contact that may lead to a useful cooperation has to depend mainly on the background and personality of the kindergarten teacher.

More specifically, not only our general experience, but also a relevant research we carried out during the academic year 2000-01 concerning the cooperation between kindergarten teachers and parents (Doliopoulou & Kondoyianni, 2003), has shown that although kindergarten teachers in Greece appear acceptive of the social dimension of their contact with the family, they automatically dig in their heels when it comes to the implementation of a cooperative policy: parents are then viewed as intruders in their work, the teachers do not feel they have any responsibility to share with them, but instead view themselves as the experts who are solely responsible for shaping the preschool environment. They do accept input from the parents on individual traits of the children, and they do provide some feedback as regards the children's performance or behavior, but such things as cooperative planning, involvement of the parents in the formulation of goals, or the

possibility of a readjustment of the curriculum that can upset the routines they've grown accustomed to, don't seem to have a place in their agenda.

According to the findings of our research, most kindergarten teachers call in the parents at the beginning of the academic year, in order to interview them and gather some verbal information (no mention of questionnaires is ever made) on the characters, medical history, strengths and weaknesses of the children. A few more scattered meetings are arranged by most of the teachers during the year to exchange some information with individual parents, only one third of the teachers call in groups of parents for some serious updates, and there is finally a small proportion of the parents who actively participate in the design and implementation of the curriculum, or make voluntary contributions in materials, resources, or personal services. It is worth mentioning that by and large the same situation is observed in public day care centers (only some independent centers provide much better services).

There is hope, however, and strong reason to believe that the parents will get involved in their children's preschool education, thanks to the implementation of the CTCF which is already bearing fruit: the Guide to Preschool Education is a reality (PI-MNERA, 2006), and the cooperation between teachers and parents is officially promoted, while the teachers are instructed as to (a) how to interact with parents who do not speak Greek; (b) how to organize group meetings and how to keep in touch with each parent through the phone, letters, e-mails etc.; (c) how to cope with problem-solving meetings; (d) how to encourage parents to participate in the development of the program of activities, and finally (e) how to help families extend their children's learning process outside the school environment. All the above, combined with the fact that all university departments of preschool education already train future kindergarten teachers to invite parents to actively participate in the educational process, are expected to yield positive results.

Assessment of the Pupils, the Educational Practice, Kindergartens and Day care centers

The curriculum of 1989 makes a limited mention of assessment issues. Only a few techniques here and there, which could provide educators with some tools for the assessment of pupils, are too vague and fragmentary to be understood and applied; some of the mentioned techniques are the teacher's calendar, the use of observation sheets, anecdotal reports, and sample observation.

The CTCF lays a greater emphasis on assessment; it includes a more detailed description of its parameters, forms, techniques and importance. According to it, assessment in the kindergarten should be a continuous process, an integral part of the daily teaching routine, and a cohering agent of the whole curriculum. It should take into account the individual characteristics of each child, any differences among the children in the manner and speed of their absorbability of the teaching content, their personal views, wishes, skills, opportunities for learning within their family- and social environment, as well as any special circumstances or needs; for example, a large proportion of the children attending our mainstream schools today speak only foreign languages, some have special educational needs or even special skills and talents.

There are three types of assessment: the initial or diagnostic assessment is used primarily at the beginning of the learning process (and sometimes also during it), to find out each child's level of experiences, knowledge and interests, to help them adapt their learning process to those, and to identify possible difficulties they will face; the gradual or formative assessment takes places during the educational process and is used to monitor the children's progress towards the achievement of specific educational goals, as well as how they develop new attitudes, values and skills, and the final or summative assessment is used to summarize the level of the children's achievement compared to the specified and anticipated pedagogical and educational targets. There is no contest going on: the level of achievement of each child is compared with his/her former one and not with

that of his/her peers, while the total class achievement is measured against the anticipated and pursued one of the class as a whole.

Assessment techniques have to be age-appropriate and suitable for the specific needs and experiences of the children. They aim at exploring each child's achievements, highlighting their personal learning profiles, and also bringing out their communicative skills and the results they can achieve though teamwork. Traditional forms of assessment –basically concerning the cognitive domain– are unsuitable for the kindergarten context; instead, alternative techniques are used, which include: (a) monitoring the process and results of assignment plans; (b) peer assessment and a total assessment by the children of their collective progress, and (c) children portfolios, which record the learning process; these portfolios contain things the children have produced during various art projects, such as sketches, drawings, and handicrafts, as well as writing samples and various results of systematic observation, which, apart from showing their progress, reveal a lot about their analytic and synthetic thought processes, their creativity, and their interests.

An assessment portfolio for each child is the result of this process; it includes the pupil portfolio together with observations and notes of the teacher, and should be at all times available to the parents. The teacher has the obligation to regularly inform the parents on the overall progress of their child, and on his/her interests, needs and particularities. Any important decisions concerning the conditions and progress of the children should be made after having taken into account the opinions of as many parents and experts as possible (PI-MNERA, 2002a).

Apart from this regular student assessment, an overall assessment of the educational process is carried out by all members of the teaching personnel of each kindergarten at meetings which take place on a three-month basis. The aim of this overall assessment is the constant improvement of all educational parameters, and the promotion of a better understanding between teachers and students; to achieve these, classroom practices have to be frequently adjusted and updated, quality of life in the school environment has to be safeguarded and improved, and the curriculum has to be implemented efficiently and promptly. Assessment is a monitoring process which provides valuable feedback to the educational practice itself, as to what can and should be adjusted and improved for the benefit of all involved.

The above processes are reaching day care centers, too; their team of educational employees organize a meeting at the end of every month in order to assess their work, their programs and their group dynamics. Moreover, many day care centers write a report at the end of the academic year, which includes an assessment of the children's progress, the educators' work, as well as their cooperation with parents. However, as there is no official legislation in use concerning the assessment of day care centers, the implementation of these processes depend on the people employed in each school.

Finally, as regards the assessment of the function and the organization of kindergartens as institutions of preschool education in Greece, it is worth mentioning that no relevant legislation has ever been enacted by the Greek state. The same goes for day care centers, although the PHAPE did carry out a Panhellenic research between 2002 and 2004, which did assess the function of some day-care centers.

Integration of children with special needs

Special education has been developing significantly during the last years in our country. A law of 2000 has modernized our legislation as is appropriate in a large European context; we are working towards a socially inclusive environment, while more and more pupils with special needs are admitted in mainstream schools. Various new educational structures have helped in this direction, such as classes of inclusion in mainstream schools, special schools for various categories of students with disabilities, coeducation programs, workshops of special vocational training, special education courses at the Secondary Technical and Vocational Institutions (STVI), Diagnosis,

Assessment and Support Centers (DASC) for pupils with special needs etc. Furthermore, awareness is being raised through many programs of specialization for educators of primary and secondary schools which are more equipped than ever to accept pupils with various special needs (Lambropoulou, 2004).

Special education has no long history in Greece. Until the beginning of the 1980's, only fragmentary laws and decrees were in use (Stasinós, 1991). The Greek state started meeting its obligations on this field of education with a law of 1981, which recognized the right of all people to have equal access to education, emphasized the importance of school- and social inclusion, as well as of vocational- and social restitution (Tzouriádou, 1995). Furthermore, the term "deviant individuals" was delimited, new categorizations were defined for them, special educational structures were planned (special classes), and the responsibility of the function of this new institution was assigned to the MNERA.

Rapid developments have taken place since 1981, including the creation of parallel full-attendance special classes in mainstream schools, classes of supportive tutoring, subsidized vocational training units for persons with special needs, as well as a vocational guidance office for disabled persons, and another office for athletes with special needs. It was also important that many prefectures were given the opportunity to form diagnostic committees (Tzouriádou, 1995). This law, however, was also much criticized, as it was believed that the existence of special classes would be unable to abolish the discrimination between "normal" and "abnormal" people, thus perpetuating the "bipolarity" of our educational system and prolonging the domination of some private institutions over special education. This was not considered as the ideal way to promote inclusion (Zóniou-Sidéri, 2000).

This criticism led to the enactment of another law for special education in 1985, which emphasized its instrumental integration in the framework of general education, and focused on the social dimension of special education, as well as on its connection to the job market. In 1983, the MNERA had to stop establishing special schools without having achieved the aim of school- and social inclusion (Stasinós, 1991), because essentially their content was not adjusted to students with special needs. The only thing the Ministry could do was to advise and even urge educators to accept, embrace, and cater for children with special needs, in a casual attempt to obscure the inefficiency of their policies regarding pedagogical content and criteria for inclusion (Tzouriádou & Bárbas, 2003); the result was that children with special needs were still excluded from general education, only in a more refined way (Stasinós, 1991).

The full incorporation of our country in the European Union which is more favorable for people with special needs, in combination with the problems of the previous laws, led the Greek state to consider the suggestions of many educational institutions, and to finally design and enact the law of 2000 (Karídas & Panagiotídis, 2003). This law redefined persons with special needs as "persons with special educational needs", and also the aims and structure of special education. More specifically, as "persons with special educational needs" are defined "those who are faced with considerable difficulties in learning and conforming to the education system as it is, due to physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional and social disabilities of theirs". This rephrasing of special education terminology, this laying of emphasis on the educational needs of people with special needs and not on the causes of their problems, are indeed big steps for our country.

The aim of the DASC is also defined as the provision of pupils-with-special-needs with services of diagnosis, assessment and support, as well as a raising of awareness among educators, parents, and the society as a whole. Finally, new specialties are given priority and educational experts are trained to provide their services in such fields as music therapy, sign-language interpretation, mobility training for the blind, provision of special educational services and tools (sign-language dictionaries, multimedia, Braille machines) by itinerant educators, etc.

Thus, thanks to the legislation in force, we can say that Greece is promoting inclusion, and special schools are reserved only for children with serious disabilities. The dominant philosophy of special education concerns the provision of equal educational opportunities to all children according to their needs and abilities, school inclusion, social inclusion and a mutual acceptance. In

line with the international developments on special education, modern Greece is no more focusing on the "disability" of the children, but on the failure of the school system to cater for their individual needs.

We can affirm that inclusion in Greece is generally taking long strides today, since more and more ex-special-schoolers are admitted in special classrooms of mainstream schools. 45 inclusion classes and 38 special kindergartens were recorded during the academic year 2001-02; by 2003-04 these numbers had already increased to 79 and 41, respectively. The number of pupils attending inclusion classes rose by 56,64 p.c., whereas the statistics showed no significant change in special kindergarten attendance. As for the educators, their numbers shrunk just a little bit between 2002 and 2004, and we cannot overlook the fact that over 95 p.c. of them were women (Tables 1 & 2) (www.statistics.gr).

The CTCF includes quite a few mentions to pupils with special needs, although up until 2004 no proper curricula were available for each disability group, educators couldn't decide what to choose, some attempts to adjust the general education curriculum to meet the special needs of their students proved unsuccessful, and unavoidably teachers and students became all mixed up. Responding to their needs, the PI started a project with the aim of designing various curricula for different categories of pupils with special needs (though not yet for pupils with learning disabilities; this curriculum will be developed at a next stage): (a) mental retardation (slight/medium to heavy), (b) hearing impairments, (c) visual impairments, (d) motor-skill impairments, (e) autism, and (f) multiple impairments (blind and deaf). For the needs of each of these categories, either special curricula were developed, and/or appropriate adjustments/modifications were made to the general education curriculum (PI-MNERA, 2004).

In conclusion, we can say that the inclusion of children with special needs in the Greek system of general education is a reality, but only institutionally, since our educational approaches and practices are still far from ideal; neither our policies, nor our educators, and not either our society are yet ready to absorb all of these rapid developments. But the Greeks have always had that urge to prove that nothing is unattainable; although it seems that we are going through a long transition towards fully complying to the new directives, and catching up with the rest of Europe is a great challenge, we are starting to embrace the notion of "convergence", the vision of a unified education for all children, and this is an encouraging sign.

Basic- and Further Training for Preschool Educators

2006 finds Greece in a welter of preschool policies in force at the same time, especially as far as kindergartens teachers are concerned (things are simpler with day care center teachers). Most of them are women, and only a 3-4 % men, due to the fact that the first male kindergarten teachers graduated only in 1984 (Kitsarás, 1997). Depending on their age and educational background, they are categorized as follows: (a) the older teachers who had undergone a one-year training, more and more of whom are retiring; (b) the middle-aged (or a little younger) two-year-training teachers, who are still the majority of kindergarten teachers; (c) graduates of a four-year preschool education, who started being appointed a few years ago; and (d) the youngest teachers with the strongest background, postgraduate studies, further training etc., the rising force of preschool education (Zográfou, 2003). As for day care center teachers, an approximate 90 % have been trained as such, while the remaining 10 % of those who are appointed to day care centers are kindergarten teachers; their overwhelming majority are, again, women.

Kindergarten teachers

Basic Training

The first kindergarten teachers in Greece (all of them women) were trained in private teachers' colleges, the first being the one established in 1837 in Ermoupolis, Syros, by the German missionary Hildner (Doliopoulou, 2000). However, the training of kindergarten teachers in Greece is closely connected to the name of Ekaterini Laskaridou, who in 1897 contributed to the establishment of the "Didaskalíon Daskálon", the first "Teachers' College" in Athens based on the Froebelian system. A few more had been established until 1912, when a two-year training was made compulsory for the future teachers enrolled in each of them. In 1914, a few more independent institutions were opened that provided a three-year training, and 1922 was the year when the first teachers' college came to the Greek state (Kitsarás, 1997; Zaharenákis, 1996).

The law of 1929 officially systematized kindergarten teacher training, described the admittance procedure of trainees, defined the curriculum of the colleges, and declared the establishment of five more colleges in Athens, the first ones that would provide a four-year-long education (Doliopoulou, 2000). One-year courses for kindergarten teachers were offered for the first time in 1956 in pedagogical academies, and 1971 saw the establishment of four teachers' colleges in other cities of Greece (Kitsarás, 1997); these closed in 1988, since, according to a law of 1982, kindergarten teacher education should be provided only in University Departments for Kindergarten Teachers (henceforth UDKT). The first two UDKT were set up in 1985, and today (2006) nine of them are in operation (Doliopoulou, 2000); the full course of studies there lasts four years, including a practical training in actual kindergartens (Zaharenákis, 1996).

Every department of preschool education has its own syllabus, which is determined by its general assembly, and is presented in a printed guide of studies that is given out to the students. All departments offer both compulsory and free selection courses, as well as practical training in public kindergartens. Syllabi in different departments vary. The graduates of these departments are appointed either as regular- or as supply teachers in public kindergartens, on the basis of their achievement on the examinations carried out by the Supreme Board of Staff Selection every two years on a national level (ERC, 2003).

Further Training

All further training of kindergarten teachers takes place in public institutions and is accorded on the basis of examinations. According to a regulation of a law of 1974, kindergarten teachers with a previous service of at least five years, were entitled to a two-year further training on general or special education. In 1983 were established the Training Centers for Primary Education Teachers (henceforth TCPET) which provided kindergarten teachers with a one-year further training, which in turn were replaced in 1992 by the Regional Further-Training Centers (RFTC) which now offer three-month compulsory courses (Doliopoulou, 2000). There is an RFTC in every big city of Greece, in order to provide to as many teachers as possible either introductory courses (for newly appointed teachers and for those who are to be appointed soon), or periodic courses (for the regularly appointed). During the academic year 2000-01, the total number of RFTCs in operation all over Greece rose to 16 (Zográfou, 2003).

Moreover, all university departments of preschool education offer diploma equalization programs in their campuses, so that all those kindergarten teachers of different educational backgrounds can be considered equally qualified (Doliopoulou, 2000). At the same time, for a few years now, these departments have been offering more and more postgraduate courses on various fields of preschool education.

In addition to the above, kindergarten teachers are also from time to time invited to events, meetings, seminars, conferences, etc. –for some of which their participation is compulsory– on various educational subjects which are offered by school counselors, the MNERA, the PI, the university departments of preschool education, the WOECE etc.

In conclusion, there are three types of further training for educators in Greece: (a) short introductory courses on basic educational issues for newly appointed teachers; (b) periodic courses for regularly appointed teachers; and (c) additional training programs and events for all educators (ERC, 2003) (Table 3).

Day care center Teachers

Basic Training

In Greece today, there are three departments of nursery schooling in Higher Institutions of Technological Education (henceforth HITE), which train all the future day care center teachers after they have succeeded at the Pan-Hellenic examinations. Each has its own syllabus, all of them offer eight semesters (seven theoretical and one practical) and diplomas are awarded after the acceptance of a dissertation by a committee. The practical semester includes three months of practice with infants, toddlers and another three with young children, which are a very important "initiation" for the students, as they get fully immersed in their future work environment with all its responsibilities for six hours per day.

The contents of the HITE courses, as well as of those offered at the university departments of preschool education, are based on the latest findings of the international preschool education research.

Further Training

Starting from a few years ago, day care center teachers are being offered more and more opportunities for further training by the departments of nursery schooling, as well as by the PHAPE, whose members can regularly participate in a variety of events: (a) every two years, a European or an international conference takes place; (b) a yearly Pan-Hellenic conference brings teachers up to date with the latest developments on preschool education; (c) every six months, small groups of teachers are offered short experiental courses on various subjects such as the use of educational computer programs, the staging of puppet shows, the inclusion of children with special needs, etc.; and (d) every weekend, one municipality in Greece organizes seminars and workshops on interdisciplinary coordination, the evaluation of municipal needs as far as nursery education is concerned, etc.

Statistics on Preschool Education in Greece

The numbers of the kindergartens and the children attending them have risen dramatically during the last thirty years. In 2001, according to publications of the OECD, the approximate percentage of five-year-old children enrolling in preschool education was a satisfactory 82 % (www.ypepth.gr). Between 2001 and 2006, however, according to the National Statistical Service of Greece (henceforth NSSG) the number of four- to six-year-old children registered in public kindergartens seems to have decreased.

More specifically, at the end of the academic year 1999-2000, there were 140.721 pupils registered, whereas at the beginning of 2004-05 there were only 136.960; the same was observed in private kindergartens: 4.751 and 4.541 children, respectively (Table 4). Male-female percentages in both public and private kindergartens were more or less balanced: 48,84 % of all children in 1999-2000 were girls, which had slightly risen to 49,02 % in 2004-05 (Marátou-Alipránti et al., 2002).

As for the public day care centers, out of the 1489 which were in operation during the academic year 2000-01, 1306 accepted approx. 78.000 children, and 132 accepted approx. 10.000 children. A smaller number of young children were accommodated in 51 day care centers which have been established by various public institutions (Marátou-Alipránti et al., 2002).

The numbers of the teaching personnel in public kindergartens seem to be increasing during the last six years. As is shown on Table 5, in 1999-2000 there were 8.637 public kindergarten teachers, which came up to 11.026 in 2004-05. Almost all kindergarten teachers there are female, although some very few males seem to be entering this arena every year: their 0,44 %. in 1999-2000, had risen to 0,60 % in 2004-05. On the other hand, as far as private kindergartens are concerned, although the female teachers are still the majority of the increasing total number of teachers employed between 1999-2000 and 2004-05, their numbers have decreased more noticeably: the initial 99 % had fallen to 97,6 % at the beginning of 2004-05 (Table 6).

As far as the teacher-pupil ratio in preschool education is concerned, it was 1:16 in 1992-93, 1:14 in 2001-02, and 1:12 in 2004-05 (Table 7). As far as the facilities are concerned, always according to the NSSG, the units of both public and private kindergartens were 5600 in 1999-2000 and had increased to 5716 at the beginning of 2004-05 (Table 8). Full-day kindergartens also have some interesting statistics: 965 in 2000-01, 1.573 in 2002-03 (Table 9). It is also worth noting that the pupil-classroom ratio has improved in favour of the pupils during 1993-2001: both numbers have increased, but the pupils not that much in proportion to the classrooms (Table 10). Finally, 2579 day care centers were in operation during 2000-01, 1489 of which public and 1090 private (Marátou-Alipránti et al., 2002).

As a conclusion of this article, we would like to say that we have done our best in order to cover all aspects of the history and developments of preschool education in Greece. The reader is always welcome to provide us with any feedback, and we will gladly respond to any comments or questions.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Inclusion classes in mainstream schools and numbers of preschoolers attending

	2001-2002		2002-2003		2003-2004	
Preschoolers	T	F	T	F	T	F
	143	52	204	71	225	67
Special Classes in Public Schools	45		60		79	

T: Total, F: Females (Source: NSSG)

Table 2: Special kindergartens, pupils και educators

	Pupils		Percentage of females	Educators		Percentage of females	School Units*
	T	F		T	F		
2002-2003	209	79	37,79%	64	61	95,31%	38
2003-2004	213	79	37,08%	63	60	95,23%	41

T: Total, F: Females (Source: NSSG)

Table 3: Kindergarten teachers with further training and additional qualifications

	MTTC	TCPET	Studies abroad	Graduate of other department	Masters	PhD	Total
2002-2003	1.104	391	55	597	78	12	2.237
2003-2004	1.196	415	56	577	109	14	2.367

(Source: NSSG)

Table 4: Numbers of students in kindergartens between 2000-2005

Academic years / nos. of students	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	beginning of 2004-2005
Public	140.721	139.455	139.711	137.572	136.222	136.960
Private	4.751	5.202	*	4.733	4.786	4.541
Total	145.472	144.657	*	142.305	141.008	141.501

* Unknown variable (Source: NSSG)

Table 5: Teaching personnel in public kindergartens between 1999 and 2005

Years	1999-2000		2000-2001		2001-2002		2002-2003		2003-2004		beg. of 2004-2005	
	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F
Teaching personnel	8.637	8.600	9.380	*	10.440	10.386	11.010	10.950	11.298	11.235	11.026	10.960
Percentage of females	99,56%		*		99,48%		99,45%		99,44%		99,40%	

T: Total, F: Females (Source: NSSG)

Table 6: Teaching personnel in private kindergartens during academic years 1999-2000 and 2004-2005

	1999-2000		beg. of 2004-2005	
Φύλο	T	F	T	F
Teaching personnel	222	220	250	244
Percentage of females	99,09%		97,6%	

T: Total, F: Females (Source: Stamélos, 2002)

Table 7: Teacher-student ratios in preschool education during academic years 1992-1993, 2001-2002, 2004-2005

	1992-1993	2001-2002	beg. of 2004-2005
Teacher-student ratios	1:16	1:14	1:12,5

(Source: Koulaidís, 2005)

Table 8: Number of public and private kindergartens between 1999 and 2005

	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	beg. of 2004-2005
Public	5.489	5.559	5.518	5.560	5.535	5.600
Private	111	116	110	110	111	116
Total	5.600	5.675	5.628	5.670	5.646	5.716

(Source: NSSG)

Table 9: Number of full-day kindergartens in operation between 2000 and 2003

	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003
Full-day kindergartens	965	1.323	1.573

(Source: ERC)

Table 10: Numbers of classrooms and pupils during academic years 1992-1993 and 2000-2001

1992-1993		2000- 2001		Percentage of change	
Classrooms	Pupils	Classrooms	Pupils	Classrooms	Pupils
7.823	135.822	9.809	144.657	+25%	+6,5%

(Source: ERC)