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Abstract

The new education reform, carried out in the 1998 – 2000, introduced for the first time in the history of Greek education a corpus of curricula which included: i) clearly stated teaching principles and goals for every subject, ii) the contents of subjects divided into units, iii) the objectives that have to be fulfilled in every teaching unit in relation to the subject aims, and finally iv) the methods and the means which are necessary in order to attain the desired objectives. This corpus is called “unified framework of curricula” and constitutes an attempt to induce a new perspective about the construction of knowledge by broadening the orientation of the teaching material and by avoiding overlapping or sterile recycling. Today, after two years of implementation of the new Language Curriculum in public preschool education, we try to elucidate the opinions, the perceptions and the attitudes of Greek preschool teachers towards the curriculum and to explore the potential of its induction in public preschool education. Our research tool was a questionnaire consisting of 56 items. The sample consisted of 250 preschool teachers. The research findings showed that nursery teachers adapted satisfactorily to the new Language Curriculum and they did not face any particular problems during its implementation. Moreover, teachers produced appropriate teaching activities based on the directives of the Greek Pedagogical Institute and they seem to understand fully the linguistic prerequisites, which are necessary for the implementation of the new Language Curriculum.

Keywords: Language Curriculum, evaluation, preschool teachers, teaching principles, teaching activities.

Introduction

The changes that have been carried out in the National Curriculum for Preschool Education Greek language as well as in the Greek educational system in general introduce a new dynamic and a curriculum model, which becomes evident in the Greek educational history probably for the first time and it is characterized by a certain continuity. The term *curriculum model* refers to a conceptual framework and an organizational structure for

decision making about educational priorities, administrative policies, instructional methods and evaluation criteria (Goffin, 2000). Descriptions of a variety of early childhood curriculum models could be found in Epstein, Schweinhart and McAdoo (1996), Goffin and Wilson (2001) and Roopnarine and Johnson (2000). The term *continuity* is used here to describe the trend for a 'natural' continuity in the teaching of Greek language among the different school stages. This continuity follows a certain organizational norm that dominates the cognitive context and the structure of the national curriculum. However, any substantial educational change should comprise certain complex processes (Pascale, 1990; Saul, 1992; Fullan, 1991) and for this reason rigorous planning and accurate estimation of all the variables that may have an influence on the procedure are necessary (Fullan, 1993). Still, it is worth noting that it seems to be extremely difficult to estimate accurately all the relevant variables and their influence on the effectiveness of every single educational change (Senge, 1990: 281; Stacey, 1992: 78).

A brief history of the language teaching in the Greek Preschool Education

A law that was released in 1895 legalized all the existing private preschool education establishments. In 1896, the Greek public preschool education was established by a royal decree. In this decree the program of lessons and activities are specified, while at the same time it is stated that the public preschool education adopts the Froebelian educational system. In 1929, preschool schools are identified as the foundation stone of Primary Education and their functioning and organizing context are redefined. During this period of time, the interest is turned to the language development, seeking to foster "exclusively Greek language" skills and support the development of the oral skills of the infants, especially in regions where "foreign language speaking populations" reside, without paying any attention to the teaching of writing and reading. During the postbellum (1954 and mostly 1962, when is set the first curriculum for the preschool education) the Froebelian system is gradually abandoned and up-to-date scientific movements for preschool education are adopted (Montessori and Freinet). The emphasis is placed again on the development of oral skills, without paying any attention to the familiarization of the infants with the written language. At the end of 1980, in the context of a general reformative effort, a new curriculum for the preschool education was implemented. This new curriculum was influenced by the French and Belgian system, based on five sections of child's development (motor, social, aesthetics, cognitive, skills); a part of this program concerns the pre-reading and pre-writing skills, which are necessary in order for the infants to "enter smoothly to the pre-reading and pre-writing process".

A brief presentation of the New Language Curriculum of the Greek Preschool Education

The new education reform, carried out in the 1998-2000 (Pedagogical Institute, 1998:10), introduced for the first time in the history of Greek education a corpus of curricula which included clearly stated teaching principles and goals for every subject, the contents of subjects divided into units, the objectives that have to be fulfilled in every teaching unit in relation to the subject aims, and finally the methods and the means (teaching aids) which are necessary in order to attain the desired objectives. This corpus is called "unified framework of curricula" and constitutes an attempt to induce a new perspective about the construction of knowledge by broadening the orientation of the teaching material and by avoiding overlapping or sterile recycling. (Pedagogical Institute, 1998:8).

Concerning the teaching of Modern Greek in Primary Education, the unified framework of curricula specifies the learning objectives following the division of speech in four equivalent speech sections specialized at every grade and adapted to pupils' age: a. listening and listening comprehension b. speaking c. reading and reading comprehension d. writing (see Pedagogical Institute, 1998:5).

The new syllabus of Modern Greek language is a legally consolidated National Curriculum document, since - unlike other countries - in Greece there are no decentralized syllabi (Charalampopoulos, 1999). Consequently, the relative argumentation that has been developed in other countries, concerning the expedience of the control that is exerted over education by the government (Xohellis, 1989; Breedom & Jefferson, 2000), has never been raised in Greece.

The modern Greek language syllabus for Preschool Education is based on the structural approach (Fereiro, 1997; Teberosky, 1997), which originates from the Piagetian view that knowledge - and subsequently language - evolve through supportive communicative relations. The meaningful "full text" is the focus of the teaching and the use of authentic texts is necessary. Through activities which involve real communicative situations, the infants are introduced in various forms of speech e.g. lists of names or things, advertisements, signs etc, utilizing the theory of text types (http://www.comvos.edu.gr/glwssa/logos_keimeno/). The development of oral speech and the emergence of infants' literacy are promoted equivalently (UNESCO, 1970; UNESCO, 1973; Ong, 1997; Pradellis, 1997; Kalantzis & Cope, 1999) and emphasis is placed on becoming conscious of the existing relations between these two forms of speech. A special literacy environment - that is a "literate" classroom environment with boards of reference and rich language material - may play a critical role towards this direction. During this process, the kindergarten teacher has to undertake initiatives and to participate as an equal partner, interlocutor and animating spirit of the children group, putting aside her/his authoritative status. (Breedom & Jefferson, 2000). In their attempt to construct their language knowledge, the infants inevitably make mistakes, which are accepted as an effort to reconstruct their knowledge about language and are considered to be the starting point of the designing of a learning process aiming to surpass such mistakes in the long run. Regarding the "language awareness" of infants (Fairclough, 1992 & Van Lier, 1995), the syllabus is concerned with the elementary and preliminary teaching of the structure (the system) of the language: phonemes and morphemes, conjunctions, active and passive voice etc. Finally, the syllabus acts in a compensatory way taking into consideration the infants coming from non-privileged social and linguistic environments.

The Modern Greek language syllabus of Pre-school education-kindergarten is a goal-oriented syllabus (Dendrinis & Xohellis, 1999), which combines goals related to:

a. infants' interactive behavior in the classroom, that is what children can do during the teaching process (see: "A variety of communicative situations should be created within the kindergarten environment, in order to encourage children's participation in discussions", Pedagogical Institute, 2000:12)

b. the development of cognitive and communicative skills of infants ("Certain conditions should be created within the kindergarten environment, in order for the children to become acquainted with the various versions of written language...in this way, infants are given the chance to distinguish whether a text, which is read to them, is dialogical or descriptive", Pedagogical Institute, 2000:13)

c..the development of infants' "language awareness" and more precisely the comprehension of basic structures of Modern Greek language and their communicative functions ("To be able to understand simple forms of metaphorical use of words...to participate in word games...to be able to organize their speech connecting simple sentences with appropriate words, e.g. and, to, or, but, because etc.", Pedagogical Institute, 2000).

Linguistic prerequisites of Early Childhood Education Curriculum

The teaching philosophy concerning reading and writing, which was proposed by the new curriculum in 1999, is based on certain theoretical conceptions deriving from the field of Psychology, Sociology and Linguistics. Regarding Psychology, the Piagetian view about knowledge construction (Goodman, 1990; Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000) – as it was specified for the process of writing by Ferreiro (1985, 1986, 1990) and Teberosky (1990) – along with the perception about the emergence of literacy hold a dominant position. The contribution of Sociology consists in illuminating the relation between school performance and social classes as well as in providing current research findings that reveal the relation between technology development and globalization, and the impact of the diversification of modern social structures on learning (Plewis *et al.*, 1990; Reynolds, 1997). The research findings obtained by Psychologists and Sociologists were the groundings not only for the formation of the linguistic and the pedagogic-linguistic conceptions of literacy and multiliteracies, but also for the construction of the theory of genres.

The term "literacy" means not only the individual's ability to read and comprehend a written text, but also the ability to 'control' life and his/her environment through written language. Literacy is a social institution, a complex phenomenon that combines multiple cultural, social, historical and cognitive aspects. The awareness of these aspects provides individuals with political emancipation (Gee, 1993). Towards this direction, the curriculum proposes a variety of procedures that help preschool children to become familiar with the literacy of their environment.

The term "multiliteracies" was created in 1994 by the New London Group and implies the variety of text types related to the technologies of information and multimedia as well as the variety of text types generated in a multilingual and multicultural society. The New London Group (1996) supports that there are multiple strata in every individual's identity as well as there are multiple reasons about identity and recognition, which must be subjected to negotiation. The new curriculum is inspired by the ideas stated above. As a result, it seeks to promote the development of the ability for negotiating the many ways of life that everyone may follow and which every individual confronts in everyday life.

The "genres" are categories, which are generated by the interaction of text features and reading habits (Swales, 1990). The genres form and restrict the messages that the reader receives from the text. According to Kress (1989, 1994) the genre is a text type and the text is the critical part of language. The genre comprises a number of model processes, from which the systems of notions and beliefs are generated, conveyed and maintained. In this sense, genres derive from social circumstances and they incorporate the functions, the aims and the meanings of such circumstances. Kress believes that the genre is a binding characteristic of every text and no text can avoid the process of genre construction. According to Fairclough (1995) genre is a relatively consistent set of conventions, which is related to a socially certified type of activities. Human beings do not construct the language but human beings are constructed by the language. The Curriculum of 1999 insists on the familiarization of preschool children with the various genres (enumerative, descriptive etc.)

Scope and Aims of the Research

The induction of the new Language Curriculum in the Greek preschool education seems to be carried out in the midst of a general uncertainty, mainly on the part of the teachers, who will have to cope with a new teaching philosophy and learning techniques which very few of them have learned to apply. Is mere training sufficient? And what if teachers' personal perceptions and attitudes towards language teaching and the use of language in general are different anyway? What does the Greek Ministry of Education know about their opinions and the difficulties that teachers faced during the first two years of the implementation of the new Language Curriculum? Do they comprehend the meaning and the philosophy of the reform in Language Curriculum (Becker, Anderson, 1998)? These are some of the issues and questions that should be dealt with before any definite decisions are taken. And this seems to be absolutely necessary, because teachers are the ones who are called upon to implement the new curriculum in the learning process effectively, to exploit its potentials and obviate its risks (Jackson, 1992). Thus, in order for such an initiative to be implemented successfully, one should be aware of the dominant ideological and perceptive versions of teachers, their ability to correspond to the innovation, their level of comprehension of the philosophy and the aims of the new Language Curriculum, along with the attitudes towards this particular issue of the people who will be obliged to contribute to the realization of the initiative (Eisner, 1991). Moreover, it is very important to elucidate the readiness and the level of preparation of the teachers to cope not only with the parameters but also with the variables that affect the efficacy of the curriculum. Besides, another crucial issue is the capability profile of the Greek educational system to modernize the changes in preschool language teaching. This is the aim of this piece of research: *To elucidate the opinions, the perceptions and the attitudes of Greek preschool teachers towards the new Language Curriculum and to explore the potential of the induction of the new Language Curriculum in public preschool education.*

Such an exploration should take into account a variety of parameters, which comprise the general context of teachers' readiness and their opinions about the induction of new Language Curriculum in preschool education. These parameters constitute the objectives of our research and they are:

- The level of teachers' comprehension of the philosophy and the aims of the curriculum
- Teachers' training in specific aspects of language teaching
- Their opinions about the usefulness of the new curriculum
- Their opinions about the adequacy as well as the effectiveness of the available means to support the initiative
- Teachers' ability to cope with the parameters of the curriculum
- Their perceptions about their role in the reform
- Their teaching flexibility.

The research tool

In this piece of research we have selected the questionnaire as a tool of research for the following reasons:

- The questionnaire attracts the interest of the people questioned more easily and increases their participation in the research procedure (Miller, 1991; Javeau, 1996)

- The necessity of using a large sample of subjects and the characteristics of the sample favor the use of the questionnaire (Verma & Mallick, 1999; Reaves, 1992; Davidson, 1970)
- The questionnaire is suitable for the collection of information, such as perceptions and opinions, which cannot be easily observed (Fraise & Piaget, 1970)
- The questionnaire is a research tool that provides the opportunity for continuous trials and interventions, in order to be constructed in the best possible way (Bickman, Rog, 1998; Javeau, 1996)

The questionnaire is consisted of 56 items that could be grouped to the following categories: Demographic data, The use of library, Evaluation of the new language teaching program, The use of every day life texts, The level of the information provided to the teachers on behalf of the Ministry of Education).

The first draft of the questionnaire was piloted in a small sample of 42 preschool teachers. After the clarification of the ambiguities noted, the questionnaire was piloted again in another sample of 52 teachers.

Results

The survey sample consisted of 250 preschool teachers. The majority of them work in regular preschool institutions (74%), whereas a smaller percent is occupied in all day preschool institutions (26%). Both types of institutions were located in urban areas (Athens-Thessaloniki, 24%) and capital cities (32%), as well as in semi-urban (24%) and rural areas (20%). Most of the preschool teachers have attended in-service training courses. Moreover, 57.2% of the respondents have a teaching experience of 16 years.

The number of infants in nursery schools varied from 3 to 63. However, in most schools (59%) the number of students was not greater than 20. Only 2.5% of the surveyed preschool institutions constituted of over 35 students, and this was typical in all day preschools in semi urban areas.

The questionnaire was designed for measuring the level of implementation of the new Language Curriculum. In addition, the aim of the questionnaire design was to help preschool teachers to evaluate and express their opinions regarding several aspects of the curriculum activities.

In order to measure the level of implementation of the new Language Curriculum, a set of questions was used concerning the frequency of exploitation of language teaching activities – based on the directives of the new Language Curriculum – in the everyday classroom. In addition, another set of questions was relevant to the level of communication and cooperation with the parents of preschool students. The results of the survey are presented in the following paragraphs.

The majority of preschool teachers (63%) noted that they have frequent communication with parents during the school year. However, it is worth mentioning that younger teachers ($X^2 = 13,98$, $df = 6$, $p < 0,05$) as well as those who work in nursery schools located in Athens and Thessaloniki ($X^2 = 30,2$, $df = 6$, $p < 0,001$) rarely get in touch with parents.

Further, most of the teachers, who participated in the current survey, have not informed parents about the new Language Curriculum. However, in the few cases where information was provided, teachers either discuss the new curriculum activities individually with each student's parents (40%) or in-groups during parents' meetings (35%). In some cases, parents sought for relevant information on their own (17%) or attended lectures of specialists concerning the new Language Curriculum (14%).

Almost three out of five preschool teachers responded that they exploit activities based on the directives of the new curriculum during language teaching. The frequency of use of such activities shows differentiation depending on the years of teaching experience ($X^2 = 14,79$, $df = 6$, $p < 0,05$). Moreover, it is worth noting that the majority of preschool teachers who rarely use such activities in their teaching (52,4%) are old in years.

Concerning the extend to which the new Language Curriculum is implemented in everyday teaching, preschool teachers stated that they often use literature (79%), informative (58%) and enumerative texts (53%), whereas they rarely work (49%) with presentation texts or texts with instructions. Furthermore, the most usual teaching activity used by the teachers is the writing of preschool students' name (90%). In addition, most of the teachers indicated that they find useful activities aiming at the development of reading (86%) and writing skills (76%) as well as word copying activities (66%) or the involvement of infants in group work (64%).

A vast majority of preschool teachers (72,6%) were involved in developing infants' library skills. The printed material, which is available in school libraries, mainly consists of pictorial books, newspapers, pictorial magazines, encyclopedia books and leaflets. The majority of the teachers, who were involved in the development of library skills, stated that they utilized the library during language teaching activities. In addition, infants attending preschool institutions, which had an organized library, borrowed printed material more often compared to children whose school did not have any library.

The next set of questions aimed at elucidating teachers' opinion regarding the new Language Curriculum. Most of the preschool teachers (88%) consider it quite or very effective. Further, another 88% believes that the curriculum can be easily implemented in the everyday classroom, despite of the fact that in most nursery schools (67%) the available material and the existing infrastructure are insufficient for the development of appropriate new language teaching activities. However, one out of five preschool teachers considered that the new Language Curriculum is very demanding for preschool students. This view is stronger in teachers with longer teaching experience. ($X^2 = 17,45$, $df = 6$, $p < 0,01$).

The next section of the questionnaire was seeking to explore teachers' views concerning the effectiveness of the new language teaching activities that they implement in their language teaching classes. Generally, preschool teachers consider these activities as very effective and the more often they use such activities, the stronger is their belief in the effectiveness of these activities (*Pearson correlation coefficient* = 0,708, $p < 0,001$).

The aim of the next section of the questionnaire was to identify preschool teachers' attitudes towards a) the new language teaching methodology, b) the existing infrastructure of nursery schools, c) the effect of the new Language Curriculum on infants' language skills. Therefore, 17 separate statements were developed and preschool teachers were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with each of them. A principal-components factor analysis using varimax rotation and three-factor extraction was performed in order to examine whether the 17 items conformed to the a priori classification. The analysis yielded a solution along the predicted dimensions with the three factors to explain the 51% of the total variance in the sample. More precisely, the new language teaching methodology factor included 7 items, explaining the 20% of the total variance in the sample, with factor loadings ranging between 0.550 and 0.822. The infrastructure factor included 6 items, explaining the 18% of the total variance, with factor loadings ranging between 0.514 and 0.747. Finally, the effect on language skills factor consisted of 4 items, explaining the 13%

of the total variance, with loadings ranging between 0.584 and 0.740. Cronbach's coefficients reached acceptable levels for all three scales (80%, 77%, and 66,2%). Table 1 shows the percentage of preschool teachers' agreement with the items of each factor. More precisely, the majority of them agree with most of the new language teaching methodology items, with the exception of one item, which states that "preschool students should learn to read by spelling the letters of the words which they come across in their environment". Regarding the infrastructure factor, most of the preschool teachers agree that they are prepared appropriately for the implementation of the new Language Curriculum, even though the Greek Ministry of Education does not provide them with sufficient support. Concerning the third factor, teachers believe that taking into account infants' existing language skills surpass the new Language Curriculum requirements. On the other hand, the majority of the preschool teachers support that library activities are demanding for infants, requiring high level language skills which preschoolers have not developed yet.

Table 1. Percentage of agreement with the items of 3 factors

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Percentage of agreement</i>
1	Nursery school can be crucial for infants' future education career	72.9%
	The wrong usage of language must be corrected incipiently in order not to be repeated in the future	66%
	Preschool students must recognize the letters of the alphabet	63%
	The development of oral speech does not require specific corrections from the preschool teacher	61.8%
	Preschool students can learn the language from supportive communicative relations	60.5%
	Copying is an elementary and not a preschool's activity	55.7%
	Preschool students should learn to read by spelling the letters of the words which they come across in their environment	37.9%
2	The number of infants in the preschool classroom affects the effectiveness of the new Language Curriculum	74.7%
	Nursery school does not actually contribute to the development of students' language skills	64.3%
	The Greek Ministry of Education introduced the new Language Curriculum without adequate preparation	55.1%
	The new Language Curriculum is ambiguous	54%
	A significant impediment for the implementation of the new Language Curriculum is parents	44.4%
	Teachers' knowledge is insufficient for the requirements of the new Language Curriculum	34.3%
	3	Library activities demand high level language skills from preschool students
Infants usually enter preschool education acquiring language skills which surpass the requirements of the Language Curriculum		45.9%
The new Language Curriculum promotes the compensatory role of preschool education		42.4%
The new Language Curriculum helps equally all the preschool students		27.3%

In order to examine potential differences in teachers' attitudes associated with the area where their school is located (capital cities, urban, semi-urban, and rural), a multivariate analysis of variance was performed. Factors' scores were considered as dependent variables, with the "area" being the independent variable. The results indicated that there was a significant effect of "area" in the scores of 2nd factor ($F_{3,196} = 8,68, p < 0,001$) and 3rd factor ($F_{3,196} = 4,86, p < 0,005$): More precisely, post hoc tests using least significant difference criteria revealed that preschool teachers occupied in capital cities declare more satisfaction with the existing infrastructure of nursery schools compared to those who work in urban (mean factor's score difference = 0.55, $p < 0.005$), semi-urban (mean factor's score difference = 0.55, $p < 0.005$) or rural areas (mean factor's score difference = 0.53, $p < 0.05$) (figure 1). In addition, it is worth mentioning that teachers from semi-urban areas are the least satisfied with the existing infrastructure. Finally, according to teachers' answers, preschool students in capital cities have higher level language skills compared to those of rural (mean factor's score difference = 0.47, $p < 0.05$) or semi-urban areas (mean factor's score difference = 0.58, $p < 0.01$) (figure 2).

Figure 1. Level of dissatisfaction with the existing infrastructure per area

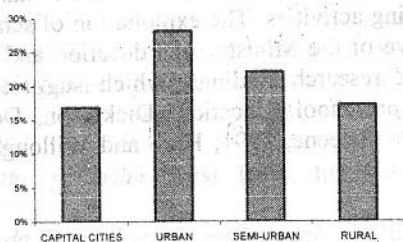
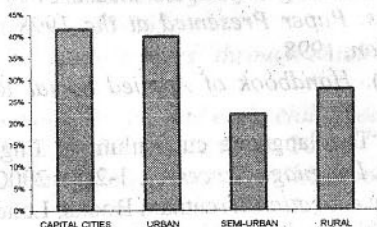


Figure 2. Level of language skills of preschool students



Discussion

We attempted to elucidate the opinions of preschool teachers concerning three principal aspects of the implementation of the new Language Curriculum in the Greek Preschool education. According the factor analysis, teachers' answers were classified consistently with our original planning and this shows the emphasis that preschool teachers place on these particular issues. The relevant bibliography indicates that there is a general uncertainty concerning the teaching methodology that should be utilized in Greek nursery schools. It is worth mentioning that only recently there was an agreement in Greece regarding the teaching methods which teachers should implement in preschool classrooms (Doliopoulou, 1999; Tsiantzi, 1998), while abroad such issues have been already resolved

(Morrow & Tracey, 1997; Newman & Roskos, 1991; Yopp & Yopp, 2000; Stahl & Murray, 1994). The new Language Curriculum attempts to solve this problem in the field of preschool language teaching.

The vast majority of the preschool teachers surveyed believe that the new Language Curriculum is useful and effective. Moreover, the majority of the teachers implement activities based on the directives of the new curriculum in their everyday language teaching. However, they indicate that their schools lack the appropriate teaching material and technical infrastructure, which are necessary for the sustention of the curriculum, a finding which is consistent with the conclusions of earlier studies (Kyridis, Aggelaki, Mavrikaki and Smaga, 1998; Saitis, 1999; Saitis and Saitis, 2002). At this point, it is worth noting that the teaching material, which sustains the new Language Curriculum, has not been sent to all the preschool education institutions yet. As a result, preschool teachers occupied in rural and semi-urban areas point out that the Greek Ministry of Education and the Greek Pedagogical Institute were not efficiently prepared for the implementation of the new curriculum and they were unable to provide teachers with the necessary teaching material and technical infrastructure.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that preschool teachers have started utilizing the school library during language teaching activities. The exploitation of school libraries in language teaching constitutes a directive of the Ministry of Education and it is consistent with the modern theories and current research findings, which suggest that the library is an extremely valuable tool for preschool education (Dickinson, DeTemple, Hirschler and Smith, 1992; First Book, 1996; Greene, 1991; Herb and Willoughby-Herb, 1994; Miller, 1990).

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