PRE-PRIMARY AND FIRST GRADE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACH-ERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE INTEGRATION OF PRE-PRIMARY AND FIRST GRADE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULA IN GREECE

ZOI APOSTOLOU, NEKTARIOS STELLAKIS, AND GERASIMOS KOUSTOURAKIS

University of Patras

Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the perceptions of Greek pre-primary and first-grade primary school teachers on the integration of pre-primary and first-grade language curricula. This research is part of a broader study of the relation between natural/early and conventional/school literacy, the teachers' perceptions of the presence of language curricula connection, as well as practices resulting from the study of curricula. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 teachers. Research findings show that pre-primary and primary school teachers partially agree with the integration of curricula, delineating it within a specific context and proposing common goals and teaching approaches that will be governed by continuity and consistency. Pre-primary school teachers who disagree, strongly express their concern about the potential schoolification of pre-primary school, while primary school teachers who disagree persist in the view of preschoolers' inability to acquire knowledge intended to be acquired by primary school children, who are, theoretically, in the age group with respective cognitive, mental and emotional maturity. They want play to maintain as the primary teaching and learning tool in pre-primary school while systematic teaching with elements of the playful way of pre-primary school learning to maintain in primary school.

Keywords: literacy, pre-primary school, primary school, teachers' perceptions, curricula

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of enhancing child literacy has been a growing concern for the international community, linked to the subsequent school success or failure of the child and therefore contributing in the long run to social well-being, social justice and the development of democracy (UNESCO, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2015, 2017).

1.1 Defining literacy

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), literacy is defined as

> "The ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2004).

According to Djonov et al. (2018) "this definition draws attention to the significance of supporting literacy learning for individual and social prosperity, both across the lifespan and in context-sensitive ways" (p. 9).

Regarding how literacy is enhanced and how language is taught, interdisciplinary research in recent decades has greatly expanded the scope of literacy mastering, adding new research data on children's familiarisation with literacy and leading to a revision of it (see, for example, de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Easton, 2014; Fives & Gill, 2015; Hanemann, 2015, 2019; Hanemann & Krolak, 2017; Ottley, Piasta, Mauck, O'Connell, Weber-Myrer, & Justice, 2015; Torres, 2009; UIL, 2010, 2017, 2018; UNESCO, 2016; Westerveld, Gillon, van Bysterveldt, & Boyd, 2015).

1.2 Greek language curricula

Various pedagogical, social, and psychological factors interact and influence learning to read and write (Davis, 2010; Ehri, 2005; Morrow, 2001; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These findings are reflected in the Greek curricula, related school textbooks, and the theoretical and methodological approaches proposed by them for pre-primary school (4-6 years) and primary school (6-12 years). The Greek curricula describe the purposes and goals of education, the specific objectives, the fundamental pedagogical principles, the content, the methods of teaching and learning and the indicators of success and modes of assessment, the learning environment, school-family relationships and some complementary activities (Alahiotis, 2001).

In Greece, for kindergarten (4-6 years old), Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten (hereafter referred to as CTC) (Ministry of Education/Pedagogical Institute [MoE/PI], 2002b) is the official curriculum. The preschool CTC

provides instructions for planning and developing activities in the following five school learning areas: Language, Mathematics, Environment Studies, Creation and Expression (through Fine Arts, Drama, Music, Physical Education) and Computer Science. According to the CTC, these learning areas are not conceived as independent subjects for independent teaching. Instead, the teachers consider these areas when planning and implementing meaningful and purposeful activities for the children. Thus, 3 years after the curriculum's publication in the Government journal in 2003, the MoE/PI published a 431 page-long book, the Preschool Teacher's Guide (hereafter referred to as PTG) (Dafermou, Koulouri, & Basagiannis, 2006). The PTG constitutes the basic tool for kindergarten teachers and contains theoretical and methodological support, guidelines on the teaching of the five learning areas described above and good practice examples of development and planning of activities. The PTG includes a separate chapter for Literacy (Sofou & Tsafos, 2009).

In Greece, Primary education lasts six years (from age 6 to 12). Children who turn six by December 31 can enroll in the first grade. For the first grade of primary school (from age 6 to 7), the Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework for Greek Language of Compulsory Education (MoE/PI, 2002a) is the official curriculum. The Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education is organized into 6 levels, each of them corresponding to one out of six primary school grades. The teaching subjects of primary school are Religious Education, Language, Mathematics, History, Study of the Environment, Geography, Natural Sciences, ICT, etc. Modern Greek Language at first grade is being taught for 9 hours per week (EC, 2019).

The teacher's Book for Teaching Language in First grade (MoE/PI, 2008a) is the guideline for teaching language in first grade. The Teacher's Book for Teaching Language in First-grade contains texts and appropriate activities for the processing of these texts, which concern the main axes, as well as the categories of the teaching objectives of the Curriculum of the Language Studies for the Primary School (MoE/PI, 2008b). Student's Book for First grade (MoE/PI, 2008b) is the textbook for the students. School textbooks have been elaborated based on National Curricula, applicable to all subjects, grades and education levels. They are distributed free of charge to pupils across the country (EC, 2019).

1.3 Literacy pedagogy

In line with lifelong learning literacy theory that treats literacy as a process which takes place throughout a person's life and across a continuum of proficiency levels (UIL, 2010), the aim of teaching the Greek Language in Primary school is to develop pupils' abilities to communicate effectively in speech and writing, in order to participate confidently in school and public life (MoE/PI, 2002a). To achieve this aim, an eclectic approach to language is attempted, combining elements from different language theories (for example: the whole-language approach, the emergent literacy, the communicative approach and functional use of language, the lifelong learning literacy, etc.) on the basis of teaching and learning needs. The curriculum includes

guiding principles (Oral Speech: Speaking and listening, Written speech: Reading, Written speech: Handwriting and producing written discourse, Literature, Vocabulary, Grammar, Information management) and general goals for these principles (MoE/PI, 2002a).

The Greek curriculum of the pre-primary school (MoE/PI, 2003b) and the curriculum for the first two grades of primary school (MoE/PI, 2003a) for the language learning area refer to modern teaching approaches, such as the whole-language approach, emergent literacy, the communicative approach and functional use of language (Alahiotis & Karatzia-Stavlioti, 2006; Koustourakis & Stellakis, 2011). According to these theoretical approaches, school literacy involves not only the code of written language, but also various other achievements in the multimodal communication environment of our time (Campana, Mills, & Ghoting, 2016; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Kennedy, Dunphy, Dwyer, Hayes, McPhillips, Marsh, O'Connor, & Shiel, 2012; Larson & Marsh, 2013; Morris, 2015). Today, first-grade language teaching (from age 6 to 7) is moving away from the great debate that dominated the second half of the last century, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon area, about which is the best method of teaching first reading/writing: instruction of decoding skills (decode written and encode spoken language) or functional use of language in a communicative environment.

1.4 Integration of curricula and continuity

The decline of the conflict, between the traditional skills-based approach, focusing on code understanding and the whole language approach that focuses on meaning, describes the literacy situation in some countries and specifically in Greece, as part of the curriculum and teaching objective (Hannon, 2000; Pearson, Raphael, Benson, & Madda, 2007; Smith, 2006), and is directly linked to the tendency that has emerged in recent years for the teaching of writing through a balanced approach model (Calkins, 2001; Comber & Nichols, 2004; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Djonov, Torr, & Stenglin, 2018; EACEA, 2011; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Hall & Harding, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2012; Morris, 2015; Pearson et al., 2007; Pressley, 2002, 2005, 2006; Routman, 2000; Torres, 2009; Xue & Meisels, 2004). The balanced approach model, combining the best elements from different approaches, is a coherent framework drawing on proven scientific theories rather than a random mix of methodological elements (Pearson et al., 2007). Xue and Meisels (2004) state that "in order to learn to read effectively, children need a balanced instructional approach that includes learning to break the code and engaging in meaningful reading and writing activities" (p. 222).

The coexistence of teaching practices that derive from a variety of different, contemporary and traditional theories, means that pre-primary and primary school teachers must not ignore them but be aware of them and try to integrate them with the ultimate goal of continually enhancing literacy. The continuity that seems to exist and is suggested by the official school curricula must be taken into account by pre-primary and primary school teachers. According to UNESCO (2017):

> "The educator is at the heart of empowering approaches to literacy, fostering a dialogue based on the learners' concerns and turning the resulting conversation into literacy learning. The flexibility and sensitivity of the educator, as well as their capacity to adapt learning strategies to the dynamic of the moment, are central to achieving both literacy and empowerment" (p. 58).

Teachers must exchange curriculum information, they have to discuss and share this information with other teachers and modify it appropriately so that the curriculum can exhibit continuity, and children can continue their learning process and achieve greater future progress (DEECD, 2009).

Within the framework of adopting a balanced approach to literacy, an important supporting factor is the continuity of the culture, traditions and learning experiences that children experience both in pre-primary and primary school (Broström, 2002; Dunlop & Fabian, 2006; EACEA, 2011, Easton, 2014). Therefore, the question arises for the need to integrate the pre-primary and primary school curricula, in particular in the language learning area. The adoption of a common pedagogical approach, common pedagogical and theoretical principles, objectives, content, teaching and learning methods, a comparable learning environment in the two curricula, delineate the integration of the two programs. Serving common goals in the light of a balanced approach and enhancing natural literacy could help to remove the potential discontinuity between the two curricula and to bring more continuity to the learning experiences of the children.

The national planning of a structured framework for the transition from pre-primary to primary school is in line with relevant theoretical approaches and common goals derived from related theoretical and didactic contexts and included in pre-school and early school learning materials (Alatalo, Meier, & Frank, 2017; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002, 2007; MoE/PI, 2003a, 2003b; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Xefteri, 2017). However, the diversity of practices adopted by the educational community, today more than ever, highlights the need to formulate a single curriculum based on common theoretical principles and linking methodological and teaching approaches to ensure continuity between school grades.

1.5 The current study

Research, mostly on an international level, has explored the views of teachers of pre-primary and early primary school (first-grade) regarding the teaching of language (Cook, 2012; Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010; Hawken, Johnston, & McDonnell, 2005; Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Kimmy, 2017; Lynch, 2009; Maloch, Flint, Eldridge, Harmon, Loven, Fine, & Martinez, 2003; Õun, Ugaste, Tuul, & Niglas, 2010; Reutzel, 2015; Sak, Tantekin-Erden, & Morrison, 2016; Sandvik, van Daal, & Ader, 2013; Shaughnessy & Sanger, 2005). In Greece, research focusing on the study of curricula and the perceptions of first-grade primary school teachers of their teaching approaches for language and pre-primary school teachers for literacy hardly

exists (Stellakis, 2012; Tafa, Manolitsis, & Fasoulaki, 2011). Moreover, no Greek research has been found concerning the perceptions of first-grade primary school teachers and pre-primary school teachers about the integration of the two curricula, as well as their interrelations.

The need to conduct this research emerged focusing on the exploration of the perceptions of Greek pre-primary and early primary school teachers on the integration of the two curricula for language.

2.   METHOD

2.1 The purpose of the research—Research questions

The purpose of this research is to study the opinions of preschool and early primary school teachers (first-grade teachers) on the relationship between early/primary and conventional/school literacy, and in particular on the feasibility of integrating the two curricula and how they believe that integration could contribute to further improvement of the language teaching approach at both levels or the reasons for their disagreement with such an integration. We are going to deal with the answer to the following research questions:

1.   What are the teacher's opinions (agreement or disagreement) about the potential integration of the two curricula?
2.   What do teachers think about young learner's adjustment to primary school if there existed a common methodological approach to language teaching at both levels?

2.2 Participants

In this research, there were 32 participants. Regarding the individual characteristics of the sample, there are 16 pre-primary school teachers (kindergarten, ages 4-6) which were all female. In Greece, the share of male kindergarten teachers is only 1.25%, while it increases as educational levels go up (HSA, 2017). Of the 16 primary school teachers (first grade of elementary school, ages 6-7), 9 (56.25%) of them were women and 7 (43.75%) were men. Half the kindergarten and first-grade teachers of our sample had basic higher education (university and/or academy), while the other half had additional studies (in service training programs and/or postgraduate and/or Ph.D.). It is worth noting that in Greece, both kindergarten teachers and teachers of primary schools receive an equivalent university education and there is equal salary pay for all teachers in the Greek public sector. 75% of primary school teachers and 50% of pre-primary school teachers are experienced teachers with 11-20 years of experience. 93.75% of teachers were working in big primary schools, 50.00% of which were co-located with pre-primary schools. Thirteen (81.25%) pre-primary school teachers worked in two-teacher schools (small schools in Greece located in

villages), 10 of which (62.50%) were co-located with primary schools. 8 teachers worked in semi-urban schools with a large number of pupils in their class and 7 pre-primary school teachers worked in urban areas with a large number of pupils.

2.3 Measures

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, content analysis method (Bryman, 2017; Cohen & Manion, 2008; Creswell, 2016). Data have been collected by semi-structured interviews with 32 educators, 16 pre-primary school teachers and 16 primary school teachers, during the autumn period of 2019. The sample was selected by simple random sampling, which is one of the probability sampling types (Creswell, 2016). However, the sample size and the geographical limitation of the survey, which took place in the region of Western Greece and specifically in the pre-fectures of Achaia and Ilia, did not allow us to generalize the results. There may be differences in their perceptions and practices from region to region. The findings of this research (although not generalizable) are not representative of teachers' opinions throughout Greece. Nevertheless, they can serve as a basis for further relevant investigations.

A set of semi-structured interview questions was created for the research. Specifically, this set consisted of a series of questions and the respondents were asked to answer or comment on them in a way that they think best (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Questions (according to the topic of this paper) included in the interview guide were:

1. Do you find it useful to integrate the two curricula?
2. Describe what are, in your opinion, the potentials and the risks of such integration?
3. Would it be easier for young learners to adjust to primary school if there existed a common methodological approach to language teaching at both levels?
4. If such integration was to be conducted, what would you suggest in order to make it successful?

Additional questions emerged during the interviews and were discussed with the aim of exploring the participants' views more in-depth.

With the consent of the research subjects, the interviews were audio-recorded (Robson, 2007), transcribed into edited transcription for clarity. We used the technique of content analysis having the content of the sentence/phrase as a unit of analysis (Creswell, 2016). Transcripts were coded using the following 4 categories of analysis (Table 1) that emerged from the objective and the theoretical framework of the research, but also from the answers of the teachers in a previous stage of the research that was carried out with the use of a questionnaire, that is, of the quantitative research in a larger research sample.

The first 2 categories of analysis concern the answers of those who seemed positive towards the integration, while the last 2 concern those who seemed negative

towards the integration of the two curricula. These categories also concern teacher's perceptions about young learner's adjustment to primary school if there existed a common methodological approach to language teaching at both levels.

Table 1. Categories of content analysis

Categories of content analysis
1. Continuity of the curriculum (common goals, joint language activities) and smooth transition of students
2. Teacher collaboration
3. Schoolarization of the kindergarten (loss of the emerging, free and spontaneous character of literacy approach in pre-primary school)
4. Different rates of student development

The coding process includes various units of analysis that were highlighted. Sentences are taken as the units of analysis which are according to their semantic meaning (Koustourakis, 2014, 2018). The sentences were placed into one of the above categories. A traditional analysis procedure (using tables in Word files) was finally used.

2.4 Confidentiality procedure

In designing and conducting the research we have considered ethical issues and ethics, by requesting permission and consent from MoE/PI (Bryman, 2017; Cohen & Manion, 2008; Fontana & Frey, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Prior to the start of each interview, the participant was briefed on the purpose of the survey, the value of participation, the anonymity of participants and the communication of the results. Further, the collected information from each participant was assigned pseudonyms (numbers) as part of concealing participants' identities. Confidentiality was guaranteed by assigning passwords to files of softcopy data and unauthorized persons had no access to the collected hard and softcopy data (Bryman, 2017; Cohen & Manion, 2008).

In the following section, the research results are presented and analyzed.

3.   PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

The findings of this research are presented along with the four main categories of analysis. Greek pre-primary and first-grade primary school teachers' perceptions of the integration of pre-primary and first-grade language curricula appear to fall into two groups of categories. On the one hand, are those who (partially) agree with the integration, and on the other hand, are those who strongly disagree.

3.1 Continuity of the curriculum and smooth transition of students

Research findings show that 10 of the 16 kindergarten teachers seemed to agree on the necessity and utility of curriculum integration for the coherence of the two levels and the smooth transition of students, although they put forward some limitations and requirements. These categories aim to a common approach to language education for the two levels with some age-specific differentiations. In particular, the integration of the two curricula for the kindergarten teachers mainly concerns *the continuity* (a) and *smooth transition of children* from kindergarten to primary school *through the adoption of a joint curriculum and joint activities* (b). Characteristically they said:

> "I find it necessary to integrate the two curricula in some respects for the smooth transition and adjustment of learners, but in a way that pre-primary school does not lose the experiential and playful nature of the learning approach; so that it isn't schoolificated. That is our great fear, of many colleagues and myself. We often discuss this. We don't want it at all" (Kindergarten teacher 8 - K.8).

> "It would be very useful to integrate the two curricula because there would be a common line between pre-primary and primary school" (K.14).

> "Learning to write as a necessary condition could be approached in primary school with more communicative goals, i.e. activities that focus on meaning production. In addition, more emphasis should be placed on the construction of oral speech, as it appears that the primary school does not have enough space and time for oral communication. Apart from the need for cooperation between the two educational levels, the planning of joint curricula and common training is required" (K.7).

Correspondingly, 9 of the 16 primary school teachers appeared to agree on the necessity and utility of integration, but also mentioned their own restrictions.

> "I believe that the integration of the two curricula is a must. Once there is a common goal, the student's progress, it is inconceivable that there is no joint planning and the best possible cooperation to achieve it. It seems like two people heading to the same spot but refusing to get in the same vehicle!" (Primary school teacher 4 - T.4).

Regarding the adjustment of learners to primary school by adopting a common methodological approach to language teaching, 12 out of 16 kindergarten teachers believe that such an adjustment would be facilitated by the common methodological approach to language, while the other 4 are more hesitant about it. Kindergarten teachers who were positive about facilitating the adjustment of learners to primary school stated:

> "A common methodological approach at the two levels would greatly facilitate the adjustment of students to primary school; not identical curriculum though" (K.10).

> "Integration is necessary, as it would not interrupt the child's learning path; it would help children adjust more easily and without experiencing the stress of moving from pre-school to a large school" (K.16).

Six primary teachers answered positively to this question, 7 were negative, giving reasons for their attitude, while 3 found it difficult to answer. Teachers who were positive about facilitating the adjustment of learners to primary school stated:

> "Kindergarten teachers are doing their job very well in a spontaneous and playful way, helping the children learn what they need to know when they come to us in primary school. Then we have to take over and introduce them to systematic teaching. We just have to be very careful and do it slowly, smoothly so there is a continuation with the pre-primary school so that it feels natural, beautiful and gentle. Only then will everything go well, and will our students integrate smoothly into organized and systematic teaching. In this, of course, we teachers play a big role; how well-informed we are, how knowledgeable, how interested we are in introducing children into systematic teaching. We need to ask, to be informed and to be trained. Unfortunately, we do no such thing. We lack the time or makeup excuses" (T.5).

> "I believe that it would greatly help children to adopt a common methodological approach to language teaching. It would help their adjustment, but also our job; we would have fewer difficulties, mostly practical ones, in the first trimester" (T.14).

One teacher who was negative about facilitating the adjustment of learners to primary school stated:

> "I do not know how realistic it is to ease the transition from pre-primary to primary school and how easy it is to integrate the curricula, as there is also a very high percentage of 4-year-olds in the pre-primary school so the needs of the curriculum cannot always be met" (T.9).

3.2 Teacher's collaboration

Most kindergarten teachers express frustrations regarding a) their cooperation with first-grade teachers and b) their perceptions of the discontinuities that they feel are present in the teaching practices of the two educational levels.

> "I would recommend a single school. Teachers are having discussions with us, being well informed, training together, having common goals and conceptual guidelines for teaching, and one level starting where the previous stops. Not to start from scratch, to consider children tabula rasa. They are not. Important work has been done at home, every child carries knowledge, experience, a learning history. So, am I supposed to undo it? Am I not going to pay the attention it needs? That's not possible. Our children have the knowledge and we need to take into account and respect what they already know from home. It is their dowry, the foundations on which we build. So, teachers have to start from where we stop. Not from the beginning. This is the biggest mistake that is made, and the only result is that the children are confused, frustrated and feel that all their efforts were wasted. If a student, a child at this tender age adopts such a mentality, I am afraid that he/she will feel disappointed every time, and I'm not sure he/she will have the courage to continue. Let us give children opportunities, through cooperation and respect for our work and that of others, to the benefit of children" (K.1).

Work experience of the teachers and the closeness of kindergarten and primary school units appeared to be significantly correlated with the responses; more experienced kindergarten teachers and those working in kindergarten close to primary schools were more positive about integration.

> "I find it necessary, especially now that attendance in pre-primary school is compulsory. Teachers should continue our work. They should start from where we stop. Isn't this the meaning of compulsory attendance? Single-type school means single-type attendance, not interrupting and starting again from the beginning every time. Compulsory means a unified philosophy, unified planning, unified vision, a unified methodological approach, and continuity in teaching and learning. It is not for everyone to do their own thing in the context of compulsory single-type education" (K.9).

However, most first-grade teachers found it difficult to formulate a clear response to the question concerning facilitating learners to adjust to primary school, as they did to the question about the need for curriculum integration. Teachers found it difficult to formulate an opinion, as they had not read the pre-primary school curriculum, and therefore could not anticipate the changes that potential language curriculum integration would bring. These teachers then made some suggestions about the potential integration of the two curricula.

> "I would like to have common activities, common goals, but I really think that every grade should maintain the existing curriculum. This will ensure its autonomy and will help students more" (T.6).

> "I suggest common training sessions, joint seminars and some common points in the syllabus. To let us know where we stand. To have a common path that is not interrupted from one level to the next" (T.14).

> "There could be a common methodological approach to literacy in pre-primary and early primary school, some common directions and common guidelines. Of course, the syllabus should not be identical. But how could this be? These are different ages, different growth rates and cognitive skills. But teachers need to be informed either through training or by pre-primary school teachers about their curriculum and what they do" (T.10).

The response of a teacher with 28 years of teaching experience is very characteristic of the hesitation concerning integration:

> "If they want, let them just tell pre-primary school teachers about how we work in primary school, to better prepare children. This is enough" (T.15).

For this teacher, it seems to be enough to inform pre-primary school teachers how language teaching is approached in primary school and how to better prepare their students for it. No willingness for collaboration, exchange of views, dialogue, no thoughts and suggestions for teacher education, joint training on the issue of enhancing literacy. He seems to exhibit an underlying misconception concerning wrong practices and inadequate education and training of pre-primary school teachers, without any intention of taking responsibility or initiative himself. In the same context another teacher refers:

> "I don't think that integration will help. It would just be good for the ministry of education and school counsellors to train the pre-primary school teachers to prepare the children a little better. Let us not have so many difficulties, such a struggle. It would be much easier for us if pre-primary school teachers knew our curriculum and the way we work" (T.2).

3.3 Schoolarization of kindergarten

Research findings show that 6 kindergarten teachers disagreed with integration, expressing worries, hesitations and fears about the schoolification of pre-primary education and the loss of playful learning and experiential knowledge acquisition, practices that characterize the whole teaching process at this educational level. In this context, corroborating their negative responses, they demand restrictions and strict conditions for the possible integration of the two curricula. They fear schoolification, but would like to initially pilot the integration of the 2 curricula "not entirely, but on some common goals perhaps", "with some axes for the smooth transition and adjustment of learners", as they indicate.

They separate the pre-primary and primary school learning process, as it takes place, and state:

> "Pre-primary school must not lose the experiential and playful nature of the learning approach" (K.3).

> "I would not want to lose the playful character we have in our class, our spontaneous play and our spontaneous activities" (K.7).

> "One curriculum should be a continuation of the other. However, I do not think that integrating the two curricula would work, as the requirements for each level are very different" (K.11).

> "I find it necessary to integrate the two curricula in some respects for the smooth transition and adjustment of learners, but in a way that pre-primary school does not lose the experiential and playful nature of the learning approach; so that it isn't schoolificated. That is our great fear, of many colleagues and myself. We often discuss this. We don't want it at all" (K.8).

First-grade teachers express worries about the loss of playful learning and experience-based knowledge acquisition, but they didn't express fear about the schoolification of the kindergarten.

3.4 Different rate of student development

Four kindergarten teachers are negative about facilitating the adjustment of students to primary school because of the different rates of student development. One clearly states:

> "At pre-primary school, the goal is not to get all children to the same level of reading and writing but to help them understand why we write and read and encourage them to write however they can. Any conventional or non-conventional writing is accepted. In primary school, this is not the case. All learners are expected to move forward at the same pace, always in line with their developmental and mental levels, and leave no gaps in the learning modules which might be hard to make up for later" (K.10).

Also, teachers who were negative about facilitating the adjustment of learners to primary school by adopting a common methodological approach to language

teaching emphasize the different needs, the different growth rate and the difference in teaching methodology as determined by each age group, saying characteristically:

> "The curricula have been designed based on the mental level of each age group, as well as the proposed activities with corresponding methods" (T.8).

> "No, I would not suggest a common methodological approach. They are two different age groups and we must respect the different growth rate of each group" (T.7).

4.   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Kindergarten teacher's opinions about the integration of curricula

Kindergarten teachers tend to avoid the total integration of the two programs while adopting a common methodological approach to some of the strands and objectives is viewed more positively. Their positions included the following attitudes:

1. They do not want a common pre-primary and first-grade language curriculum;
2. They want "a better communication framework (discussion, dialogue, joint education and training, common goals, common work axes) between the two levels and the establishment of a common course of action, at least for the last months of pre-primary and the first months of the first grade of primary school, they pick up where we stopped";
3. They want closer cooperation and joint actions at regular intervals;
4. They want "the first grade to move closer to the pre-primary school, in relation to the design of the space, the stimuli, the classroom layout".

4.2 First-grade teachers' opinions about the integration of curricula

First-grade teachers were completely negative regarding a complete integration of the 2 curricula and more positive about integrating some of the objectives, axes and methodologies of the 2 approaches. They proposed a common methodological approach without referring in detail to its importance in facilitating students' adjustment to primary school. The attitudes of -primary teachers include the following:

1. They do not wish a completely integrated language curriculum for pre-primary and early primary school,
2. They wish that "there are common policies, common directions, common axes, not an identical curriculum",
3. They wish the education and systematic training of the pre-primary school teachers should include the teaching syllabus of the primary school, in order to better prepare pupils for the first grade;
4. They want teacher training "to keep up with modern methodology and innovations ... It would help the students' adjustment, but also our job; we would have fewer difficulties, mostly practical ones, in the first trimester".

In conclusion, kindergarten and first-grade teachers seem to partially agree with curriculum integration.

4.3 Kindergarten and primary school teachers' suggestions about the integration of curricula

But even those who agree to delineate and define it within a specific context, in agreement with the Greek curricula and research data (Alahiotis & Karatzia-Stavlioti, 2006; Broström, 2002; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Dunlop &Fabian, 2006; EACEA, 2011; Easton, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2012; Koustourakis & Stellakis, 2011; Larson & Marsh, 2013, MoE/PI 2002a, 2002b; Morris, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Xefteri, 2017), proposing common goals and teaching approaches that will be governed by continuity and consistency. They want to keep play as the primary teaching and learning tool in pre-primary school and systematic teaching with elements of the playful way of pre-primary school learning in primary school (De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Xefteri, 2017; Xue & Meisels, 2004).

Kindergarten teachers who disagree with integration express strong fears of a schoolification of the pre-primary schools, while teachers who disagree persist in the view of children of this age not being able to acquire knowledge intended to be mastered by primary school children who are theoretically in the age group with the cognitive, mental and emotional maturity.

Kindergarten teachers' frustration with their cooperation with first-grade teachers in enhancing literacy, but also of the discontent they feel in pre-primary and first-grade teaching practices is reflected in their responses to the question of facilitating the adjustment of learners to primary school by adopting a common methodological approach to language teaching. The teachers show negative attitudes on this question, as well, emphasizing the different needs, different growth rates, and variations in the teaching methodology regarding each age group.

4.4 Findings' correlation with international research data

In line with international research data (see, for example, Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Djonov et al., 2018; Dunlop & Fabian, 2006; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Koustourakis, 2014; Sivropoulou & Vrinioti, 2009; Stellakis, 2012; Xefteri, 2017), kindergarten and primary school teachers make suggestions for a *better communication framework* (discussion, dialogue, information, joint education and training) and the *establishment of a common course of action* (common goals, common strands of work between the two levels) *at least for the last months of pre-primary and first months of primary school.* There is also an important but expected contradiction in their responses, with kindergarten teachers wanting "first grade to move closer to the pre-primary school, in relation to the design of the space, the stimuli, the classroom layout" and teachers wanting "the education and systematic training of the pre-primary school teachers on the teaching syllabus of the primary school, in

order to better prepare pupils for the first grade". Teachers of both grades seem to reject responsibilities and to assign the burden of responsibility about ensuring educational continuity to teachers at the level that follows or precedes their own.

According to the basic goal of the kindergarten curriculum, preschool education is an integral part of our educational system (Dafermou et al., 2006; Koustourakis, 2014; MoE/PI, 2002b) and therefore, national planning of a structured transition from pre-primary to primary school seems more important than ever. It is in this context that the feasibility of an integration of the two curricula increases to demonstrate their relevance and the continuity that should exist in the practices proposed to be adopted by teachers at both levels. These findings are in line with international research data (Alatalo et. al., 2017; Cook, 2012; Djonov et al., 2018; EACEA, 2011; Easton, 2014; Fabian & Dunlop 2002, 2007; Guo et. al., 2010; Hanemann 2015, 2019; Hawken et. al., 2005; Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2012; Kimmy, 2017; Lynch, 2009; Maloch et. al., 2003; Morris, 2015; Õun et. al., 2010; Pearson et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 1999; Reutzel, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Sak et. al., 2016; Sandvik et al., 2013; Shaughnessy & Sanger, 2005; Torres, 2009; Xefteri, 2017; Xue & Meisels, 2004) and data from UNESCO (UIL, 2010, 2017, 2018; UNESCO, 2005, 2007, 2015, 2017).

Considering the suggestion of the teacher's book for the first-grade Greek Language (2008), as a supplementary manual to the curriculum, according to which "it is good for the first-grade teacher to try as much as possible to find out what the children already know from pre-primary school or even the family environment, to build on existing knowledge" (p.8), one recognizes the necessity and importance of enhancing the continuity of curriculum theoretical principles and methodological approaches in textbooks and pre-primary and primary teachers' literacy practices. These findings are in line with international research data which stated the necessity of the continuity in early literacy practices for the sustainability of children's progress (see, for example, Fabian & Dunlop, 2002, 2007; Hall & Harding, 2003; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Scarborough, 2001).

4.5 Lifelong learning theory and integration of curricula

Specifically, and in line with lifelong learning literacy theory (Djonov et. al., 2018; EACEA, 2011; Hanemann, 2015, 2019; Hanemann & Krolak, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2012; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016; Torres, 2009; UIL, 2010, 2017, 2018; UNESCO, 2005, 2007, 2015, 2017; Xue & Meisels, 2004) mastering literacy is an ongoing process and smooth transitions of students from one level to another can be greatly facilitated if educators from one grade, for example, the pre-primary school, cooperate with those of the next grade, that is, the primary school, and vice versa (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Teachers who combine approaches, methods, and techniques to become more effective for their students, who are well informed, trained and who study the theoretical principles, suggested methodological approaches, and teaching practices that

follow or precede their own level, enhance the continuity of literacy from pre-primary to primary school (UNESCO, 2017). In particular, in the context of information, co-education, cooperation and exchange of views, the adaptation and co-creation of theoretical principles and teaching practices under a common practice could be encouraged (Alatalo et. al., 2017; EACEA, 2011; WEF, 2000).

Teachers, accordingly to UNESCO (2017), could play a very important and essential role (online consultation, curriculum development and national design of a structured transition from pre-primary to primary school) in shaping a framework with a common path, common purpose and common directions in which the thread of conquering literacy will not be interrupted as children move from one level to another. Only such a framework of shared approaches, perceptions and practices can the pupils work and continuity preserve from interruptions (Broström, 2002; DEECD, 2009; EACEA, 2011; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Frank-Oputu & Oghenekohwo, 2017; Hanemann, 2015, 2019; Hanemann & Krolak, 2017; Torres, 2009; UNESCO, 2017; WEF, 2000); and as one teacher has typically pointed out "We just have to be very careful and do it slowly, smoothly, so there is a continuation with the pre-primary school so that it feels natural, beautiful and gentle".

4.6 Conclusions

The research findings highlight the convergence and divergence of views of Greek kindergarten and primary school teachers for the need for an integration of the two Greek curricula, to demonstrate their relevance, as well as the continuity that should exist in the practices, suggested to be adopted by teachers at both levels. The geographical limitation of the research, which took place in a specific geographical area of Greece and a limited sample size of the survey, does not allow us to generalize the results. However, this research must be considered a first short-range investigation of the assumption that mixed groups of preschoolers and first-graders improve students' literacy to some extent. It would be useful to repeat the research by drawing a larger and representative sample of teachers without geographical limitations and further investigate the need for a balanced literacy curriculum and smooth transition of children from pre-primary to elementary school.

We consider that this study provided valuable insights into how preschool and the first grade of primary school teachers perceive the possible integration of the two curricula. Organizing a two-level institutional interaction framework, creating learning communities and adopting action-based methodological approaches would create a framework that could function as a bridge between pre-primary and primary schools with positive effects on the continuity of student education, for teachers and the school community at large. According to the basic goal of CTC for kindergarten (MoE/PI 2002b) and PTG (Dafermou et al., 2006), preschool education is an integral part of our educational system and therefore national planning of a structured transition from kindergarten to primary school seems more important than ever.

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