

Preschool Teachers' Understandings of the National Preschool Curriculum in Greece

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Abstract In 2003, a new curriculum was enacted in Greek preschool education, replacing the previous one of 1989 and following the development of new curricula for the other rungs of compulsory education. Within this context, the new curriculum development policy aimed at an equal integration of preschool education into the unified design of primary and secondary education. A basic issue in any such educational change is how teachers make sense of the new curriculum and what impact it has on their thinking and daily practice. Considering the need to better understand the relationships between curriculum and parameters that shape practice, the study examines preschool teachers' perspectives of the new early childhood curriculum and its implementation, as well as the extent to which the new curriculum has influenced preschool practices.

Keywords Early childhood education · Curriculum · Teachers · Greece

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a greater awareness of the need for curricula or pedagogical guidelines in early childhood settings and the publication of a rash of new national or state curricula in many countries around the

globe. Other countries, with a long tradition of state mandated curricula, have moved towards decentralization and diversity or have updated their existing curricula (Oberhuemer 2005; Bennett 2005). Among other reasons, regulating the curriculum is seen as raising the status and visibility of early childhood institutions; a quality improvement and equity measure; a necessary goal steering device within the context of national decentralisation policies and as establishing a shared framework of guiding principles, in collaboration with the major stakeholders in the field (Oberhuemer 2005). Curriculum guidelines can also ensure continuity in children's learning as they approach compulsory school age (Bennett 2005).

In the light of the increasing attention that is paid to curriculum issues in early childhood education, the study focuses on recent early childhood curriculum policy in Greece. State curriculum regulation is not a new trend in the field of Greek early childhood education. In 2003, a new curriculum was enacted replacing the previous one of 1989. A basic issue in any such curriculum change is how teachers make sense of curriculum initiatives and what impact these have on their thinking and daily practice. Policies, according to Gvirtz and Beech (2004), are not transmitted into a vacuum. There are social, institutional and personal circumstances affecting the way in which policies are understood by those who are supposed to put them into practice. Thus the effects of a given policy cannot be understood simply by reading the policy texts. Rather, it is necessary to look at the interpretations that these texts have been given in practice in order to determine the coherence or incoherence between a policy and its impact. Considering the need to better understand the relationships between curriculum and parameters that shape practice and the paucity of research on the implementation of national preschool curricula (Kable 2001;

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Alvestad and Duncan 2006), the study examines how Greek preschool teachers construct the new state curriculum and the extent to which preschool practices have been influenced.

Early Childhood Education and Curriculum in Greece

In Greece, preschool education is tightly connected to primary education: Law 1566/1985 stipulated that preschool education belongs to primary education (children 6–12 years old); a great part of its operation follows the same legislative regulations that are in force for primary schools. Specifically, early childhood education is provided in kindergartens (*nipiagogia*—literally *a place in which to educate young children*), which operate independently or in centres together with state primary schools for children aged 4–6. Since September 2007, under the provisions of Law 3518/2006, the second year of childhood education is compulsory for young children who have completed their fifth year of age by 31st December of their enrollment year. Most kindergartens are state-run, while the number of private ones is quite limited. Since 1984, preschool teachers are trained at university departments of education, a fact which has contributed to elevating the status of early childhood education.

The Greek educational system is characterised by centralisation and bureaucratic administration, which is reflected in the curricula as well as in many other parameters of schooling (Kazamias et al. 2001; Georgiadis 2005). Thus, state curriculum regulation in preschool education is not considered a controversial issue. As mentioned above, the new preschool curriculum replaced the previous one of 1989. Since little research has been done on the implementation of the latter, the ways and the extent to which preschool teachers used it remains unclear. Some researchers argue that only a limited number of preschool teachers actually implemented it, and it may not always conform to the curriculum's explicit goals and intentions (Kitsaras 2004; Chrisafides 2004; Evangelou 1996). One of the reasons offered for this lack of enthusiasm is that the new curriculum was not accompanied by the necessary in-service training. Thus, to many teachers it seemed as if the MoE (Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs) was responding to their need without seriously committing to engage in a deep revision of kindergarten practices (Evangelou 1996). In conclusion, although the field has not been systematically investigated, it seems that, despite the existence of a mandated curriculum, preschool teachers developed a curriculum based more on their personal, professional knowledge and beliefs rather than on the official curriculum documents. Moreover, we have to consider the systemic expectations regarding the use of

state curriculum documents. These differ in preschool education, compared to the rest of the educational system and influence how preschool teachers view the curriculum (Kable 2001).

Theoretical Framework

The development of any new policy is integrated within a specific historical, political, social and economic context (Taylor et al. 1997). The aim of reform is not only to organise and regulate teachers' experiences but also to establish relationships between individual teachers and the state (Ball 1994; Taylor et al. 1997). Curriculum reforms are influenced by power relations and competing agendas and discourses; these determine how curriculum will be viewed in practice (Carter and Burgess 1993; Maw 1993; Taylor et al. 1997). The dominant discourses of curriculum reform processes influence teachers' practices and shape their views on what constitutes a legitimate curriculum (Taylor et al. 1997). Curriculum policy does not follow a linear top-down model, as this would fail to include the contestation involved in policy implementation (Pinar et al. 1995). Debates about the nature and purpose of educational policy suggest that policy is a process, not just a product (Osgood 2004). Bowe et al. (1992) described three contexts within which education policy is formulated and enacted—the context of influence, the context of policy text production and the context of implementation. This triangle illustrates the dynamic, contested and cyclical nature of the policy process, as well as the role of key players within this process. That is, how a policy process itself is perceived has a significant impact on how this particular policy will work out (Osgood 2004). The model thus helps to explain why policies may be conceived in one way at the level of policy text production, for example, but may be interpreted quite differently at the level of implementation, leading to both intended and unintended outcomes (Hodgson and Spours 2006). It also helps to explain how different parties in the policy-making process may enjoy a privileged position at different points in the policy cycle. Practitioners, for example, are likely to have little power when policies are conceived, but the balance of power may move strongly in their favour when the policy is enacted, since they can either mould or subvert government intentions. Ball argues that policies are both contested and changing, and that “clearly, inside the school and classroom practice, it is school managers and classroom teachers who must put the bits and pieces together—construct their own subjection if you like” (Ball 1994, p. 12). The key point here is that curriculum policy is never simply implemented; it is interpreted, mediated and recreated. This happens because practitioners, whose task it is to implement the policy, come

with their own contexts, value systems, history and experience (Hall 2001).

The Greek New Preschool Curriculum Framework

The enactment of the new curriculum in preschool education followed the development of the new curricula for the other levels of compulsory education. The curriculum reform was launched during the period 2001–2003, as an attempt to treat some of the dysfunctional symptoms and anachronistic issues of the Greek educational system, like traditional field-centred curricula and teaching strategies (MoE/PI 2002). Thus, it was not concerned with early childhood education *per se*, but mainly with the compulsory education curriculum. The implementation of the objective of a new curriculum was undertaken by the Pedagogic Institute (PI), an organization supervised by the MoE with competences in the field of the curriculum, textbooks and the retraining of teachers. The new preschool curriculum is part of the three-volume national curriculum framework (*Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework Syllabus Design*, hereafter referred to as CTC, MoE/PI 2002) for all grades and subject areas of the compulsory education. By being included in the unified planning of the curriculum, early childhood education was granted equal status with the other rungs of the educational system. On the other side, this inclusion implied the reformers' desire to present a homogeneous curriculum framework from kindergarten to junior high school with a unified structure and an integrated approach to learning and teaching (Chrisafides 2006).

Aiming at the renewal of the knowledge content and the adjustment of teaching methodology, the CTC established mixed pedagogical practices, justified by the use of cognitive and development psychology theories and combining traditional and technical-instrumental logic (Koustourakis 2007). One of the main underlying discourses of the CTC is the cross-thematic approach to learning (*diathematikotita* in Greek). The term cross-thematic “exceeds interdisciplinary concept and outdoes it” (Alahiotis 2002, p. 11). Despite any claims of introducing a cross-thematic approach to learning, the organising of school knowledge into distinctive and independent subjects is neither questioned nor transformed. On the contrary, emphasis is placed on the fact that for a more effective implementation of the innovative strategies subject-based teaching should be maintained, or at least taken into consideration (MoE/PI 2002). Thus, the CTC apparently claimed to reconcile the two curriculum codes Bernstein (1971) theorised—the collection (subject-based curriculum) and the integrated (cross-thematic/curricular approach) code. However, Bernstein (1971) suggested that

such reconciliation “is not theoretically possible, because curricular structures are not simply the result of educational decisions, but reflect basic societal differences in the distribution of power and principles of social control” (cited in Maw 1993, p. 70). The CTC tried to ‘reconcile’ the two curriculum codes with the introduction of “fundamental cross-thematic concepts” which constitute the horizontal axis that interlinks various learning areas and possess important scientific diachronic value. Such concepts are: ‘interaction’, ‘dimension’, ‘(time-space) communication’, ‘change’, ‘unit (atom-element)’, ‘whole (group, set)’, ‘similarity-difference’, ‘civilization’ and ‘system’ (MoE/PI 2002). However, the CTC has been critiqued for the vague way the above concepts permeate the resulting subject-based curricula as well the lack of clarity regarding the concept of the cross-thematic approach (Aggelakos 2007; Moumoulidou 2007).

The few problematic elements of the CTC described above are also inherent in the 36-page new preschool curriculum framework (MoE/PI 2002). Child-centred discourses merged with content-focused agendas in the shaping of the text. The child-centred discourses include concerns for the social-constructivist concept and cross-thematic approach to learning, the teacher's facilitator role, the experiential nature of learning, children's individual development and needs, children's active participation, team work, the importance of the learning environment and play and the project work. However, despite its claims to integrated learning, preschool curriculum focuses on distinct subject-learning areas, with particularly strong emphasis on cognitive development and a considerable number of goals (*over one hundred goals*). Thus, 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 are urged to take these areas into consideration when planning and implementing meaningful and purposeful activities for the children.

The curriculum reform continued with the process of the creation of new educational material. Thus, 3 years after 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 as *PTG*), so as to guide preschool teachers in the implementation of the new preschool curriculum (Dafermou et al. 2006). The publication of *PTG* was not considered a new practice in the Greek education system and preschool curriculum policy. In Greece, education textbooks are approved by the MoE and are accompanied by the respective teacher's

guide. The previous curriculum of 1989 was also accompanied by a *Book of Activities* and included detailed guidelines for implementing the curriculum. The publication of a long, detailed document accompanying the curriculum seems to compensate for insufficient teacher training on the new curriculum guidelines, in an attempt to bridge the gap between a confused and vague theory and the real and complex practice. The PTG contains theoretical and methodological support, including the basic theoretical principles that condition how the learning-teaching process is perceived in the new preschool curriculum, the description of the kindergarten teacher's expected role, the practice of children's and educational assessment process, proposals for effective communication with the parents, and guidelines for the construction of an appropriate learning environment. However, the document mostly contains guidelines on the teaching of the five learning areas described above and good practice examples of development and planning of activities that have been implemented in Greek kindergartens. In this sense, the PTG constitutes an interpretation of the curriculum text by its very creators. As a result, the text doesn't avoid a standardisation of pedagogical practices through concrete examples of "good practice", although it is stated that its objective is only to provide 'ideas' about the implementation of the curriculum.

Thus, the resulting model of the two curriculum documents attempts to achieve equilibrium between conflicting models of curriculum construction. Maw (1993) warned that any efforts to balance competing views may result in texts that reproduce unstable and conflicting meanings. However, he argues that neither the specific texts nor the underlying discourse will determine how schools actually implement the curriculum. This will depend on how "those in schools, as collectives of agents, 'read' the texts (if they do) in relation, certainly, to other discourses in which they are engaged, but also to other objects and events in their world which are not only discursive but material" (Maw 1993, p. 72). Thus, the 'consumption' of a curriculum, quite like its production, has to be negotiated within the constraints of particular institutional locations.

The Study

In order to capture and explore the teachers' own understandings and constructions of their new curriculum, qualitative methods were chosen as appropriate for this study. The present qualitative study was based on in-depth interviews with a small number of preschool teachers. In-depth interviews were carried out with 11 Greek preschool teachers, focusing on their understandings of the national early childhood national curriculum framework and on

how this linked to their planning and practices with children. Fieldwork was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2007–2008. In order to recruit the participants, we employed the snowballing technique, asking early childhood consultants for their help, or asking the initial participants to indicate other preschool teachers who were likely to be interested in participating in our study. We would then contact the indicated teachers, enquiring whether they wished to participate. With a single exception, all participants were women, as early childhood teachers in Greece are primarily female. All participants are working in public kindergartens in the metropolitan area of Athens. Almost all participants have more than 10 years of teaching experience in public early childhood education, except for three teachers, who have <10 years experience, while some have also worked for a long time in private schools. All but two had been trained as preschool teachers at a university department of early childhood education.

After the interviews were transcribed, the analytic process involved what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called the "constant comparison" method (Tesch 1990, p. 24). Provisional categories of salient themes and emerging issues were identified through this analytic process. These categories of understandings are then viewed as constructions through multiple readings and interpretation of the data by the researchers. The fact that both authors were involved in the process of the analysis provides an added strength to the study in terms of data validation. It should be noted that these teachers were volunteers and their views don't necessarily represent those of other groups of teachers. The article presents only part of our study, focusing on teachers' understandings of the meaning, value and focus of the curriculum framework, while the remaining aspects of the research questions will be further analysed at a later date.

Analysis and Discussion of the Findings

Preschool Teachers' Views of Curriculum

Most preschool teachers in our study view curriculum in early childhood education as necessary. They declared that curriculum guides and supports their work, delimits the objectives of preschool education and provides instructions or establishes a common framework of guiding principles for enhancing communication between teachers and with parents (Oberhuemer 2005). However, the teachers who seem to view the curriculum as indispensable are the less inexperienced, as the following quote demonstrates:

I am in the beginning of my career and I need guidelines in any case. I don't have biases and I don't

keep to the beaten track. For me the curriculum is essential and useful... (Teacher D)

In contrast, the majority of the older, more experienced preschool teachers seem to subordinate the curriculum to their “real knowledge”, which is kept in their heads and validated by years of classroom experience:

The curriculum had a different importance in the beginning of my career. In the beginning, we used to feel a little bit feeble if we didn't have the curriculum framework for a guide. We turned to it for some help... After so much time, and because of our experience, we now understand that there is no need to follow it closely ... (Teacher C).

At the same time, all interview participants agree that the early childhood education curriculum is or should be a flexible one, quite different from the curriculum for the other rungs of schooling. Most of them declared they cannot enact a curriculum framework as stipulated. The children's age, the local classroom conditions, and the teachers' conceptions of their role are some of the factors influencing teachers' curriculum decision making, as mentioned by interview participants:

[The curriculum] supports and guides us, to the extent that we allow it to. In practice, we all adapt it according to the needs of our class. We cannot deliver the same curriculum in Menidi, in [Kifisia] or in Heliopolis. Each school has its particular needs. The teacher's role is to adapt it according to the particular needs of each school and each child. We have the potential and the knowledge to adapt it... Therefore it doesn't exist as a commitment, a strict commitment (Teacher D)

The following extract illustrates what research had ascertained; teachers can and do remake policy at school and class level, in ways that are not necessarily in line with the official position (Hall 2001):

The curriculum ... has to be guiding and supporting, allowing the teacher to be flexible. Now, how the teacher will use it is up to the teacher; it doesn't matter how the State constructs it..., but how we the teachers understand it, and how we apply it. It is up to us... (Teacher C)

When asked to speak on what determines their curriculum planning, most teachers explain that they build it based on their observations of children's needs and interests, connecting them to the content of the official curriculum. As one teacher stated:

When something happens in the classroom, I don't think about the curriculum immediately. I could say

that for a moment it's like the curriculum does not even exist. My emphasis is to see what the children will say. After problems are settled and a context of activities is created, I will consider the curriculum and check how I connect it to its content. I try to understand how interested the children are and that's why I do not anticipate thinking of the curriculum... everything can be developed if it's attributed the appropriate importance at the appropriate time. (Teacher B1)

The above analysis highlights that teachers conceptualise the curriculum as an open and broad set of guidelines, which is flexible enough to be adapted to the children's particular needs and to other local needs and circumstances. On the one hand teachers, mainly the inexperienced, tend to value the curriculum as a common framework which guides their work with children, yet on the other hand they assert their right to “own” it.

Making Sense of the New Curriculum Framework

There are variations in preschool teachers' understandings and use of the new curriculum framework. One of the most interesting findings established is that most teachers interviewed saw the CTC as a peripheral document and the PTG as the central document for their work. One of the reasons is explained as follows:

[The CTC] isn't easy to understand, it isn't explicable ... [The PTG] is well-written and can help us. It's the only thing that can help us. We have it in our classroom and every day we look at it. Because it contains paragraphs with the questions we should ask to the children, it has certain chapters on the teachers' knowledge and others on our work with the children (Teacher J).

Another reason, as a teacher remarked, is that the PTG contains a lot of familiar activities codified regarding this as a confirmation of her professional work. Nevertheless, she considers that the PTG is not to be used as a manual to “be copied”, but as a tool—this is also explicitly stated in the introductory note of the PTG.

I have found a lot of things in the PTG that represent me, activities I have been working on for a long time. I feel well that this book exists; it is very useful for the new girls, even for us..., but they have to be ready to choose and adapt the activities it provides. Even if they choose to do the very activities provided in the PTG, they will never be the same in practice. (Teacher A)

While most teachers see the PTG as the central document for their work, some of them view the CTC as the

basis for their educational planning and practice, going to the extent of likening it to the ‘bible’, as one of them stated. It seems that the CTC could help justify and add credibility to their practice, so as to demonstrate accountability (Carter and Burgess 1993), when they have to talk to the parents and present information of their practice. Moreover the CTC itself is considered to allow more freedom to teachers to interpret the curriculum than the PTG. However, another group of teachers see and use both curricular documents as interconnected parts of a whole curriculum framework, with different but interconnected functions.

I used to turn to the curriculum text when I wanted to see its aims...when I wanted to record the activities. In particular, I looked it up when I want to connect the third histogram with the aims and the activities. That is to say, when the first, second and third histograms have been developed, namely what the children know, what they want to know and what they should do to learn about it, then I look at the curriculum framework to see what objectives serve the children’s words ...Then, I use the PTG when I have questions. For example, I had many doubts on team work... (Teacher B1).

Finally, an older teacher, with 30 years of experience, implied that none of the two key curriculum documents influences her daily planning and practice with children. It seems that she simply isn’t interested in changing her practice, which is based mainly on her long experience in working with children, so she ignores both curriculum documents. In that sense, this practice confirms research findings that “some texts are never even read firsthand” (Ball 1994, p. 17) and that there are many teachers who have not read any state curriculum document.

The new book they gave us [the PTG] I haven’t read it very well, because it is quite long...The CTC I think I may have opened... We just don’t have the time. Our profession is one of the hardest...So many changes....However I am not afraid of anything, whatever change may come. I am not afraid. In this way, I don’t follow the new one so much. I don’t study it. Well ...what could I learn from a new book These are thirty years ... (Teacher E).

What has Changed?

Most interview participants consider that, to a significant extent, the new curricular framework is differentiated from the previous one and have welcomed these changes wholeheartedly. The most important changes mentioned by the teachers are: the new plan’s openness, which provides more freedom to both teacher and child; its response to

contemporary needs, for instance the introduction of new cognitive areas like technology; its emphasis on assessment and recording; the introduction of new child-centred methods, like project work and team work; the inclusion of contemporary theory in the field of early childhood education and the cross-curricular approach to knowledge. Moreover, two teachers consider that the most important change in comparison to the previous one concerns the teacher’s role. The following extract illustrates the teacher’s perception of their changing role in the new curriculum framework:

I see a lot of differences. Now if I have to put them on a scale I should put the teacher’s position first. If a teacher-centred plan becomes child-centred, everything changes. I consider this the most important parameter. When teachers realise that their position isn’t in front of the children, but next to them or behind them, they are going to work on the children’s interests, on the group, they won’t be the one who decides. I believe this is the most important thing that should take place, all the others are transformed automatically; if this happens it means that you have matured, you have seen your classroom differently, there is not just you and your classroom anymore; you are all in it together. I think the teacher’s coordinating role is the bigger change. It’s very difficult to stay behind the children, but you can easily stand next to them. (Teacher B1)

Another characteristic of the new preschool curriculum—its inclusion in the unified design of the compulsory curriculum—seems to provoke contradictory feelings to the teachers interviewed. Thus, one teacher exclaimed on the high value of the new preschool curriculum framework regarding its contribution to enhancing the status of teacher’s work, which is now better recognised, while another one stressed that the strong relationship with the compulsory education could reinforce the schoolification of early childhood education:

I like that the new plan included kindergarten in the primary curriculum and this is like a chain which continues up to primary and secondary school. It contributes to a better status for our work. In the previous plan, there was no such link with the other rungs of education (Teacher F).

We feel that there has started to be a kind of intensity in the kindergarten as well and we don’t agree with it. I use “we” because this isn’t only my own impression.... We see a trend of schoolification in the kindergarten and I am opposed to this....It is going to be a school. Many of us, we begin to feel anxious. (Teacher G).

Finally, while the majority of the teachers perceived that the new curriculum is differentiated to a significant extent from the previous one, two teachers consider that there are no explicit changes. As one of them stated:

I don't see any explicit difference in the new plan in comparison with the last one. There is a difference in the way it is presented. (Teacher J)

The Cross-Thematic Approach to Learning and the Focus on Specific Learning Areas

One of the most significant features of the new preschool curriculum framework, as stated above, is the cross-thematic approach to learning. Nevertheless, despite its claims to integrated learning, its content emphasises distinct school-like learning areas. Thus, we are interested in how the teachers have made sense of the introduction of the cross-curricular approach to learning, as well as of the focus of the curriculum on specific learning areas. The cross-thematic approach of the curriculum framework was seen by several interview respondents as positive for children's learning and appropriate for early childhood education. One preschool teacher remarked:

In Kindergarten, there has to be a connection of the cognitive areas. When we speak about a theme we have to be in a position to cover all the cognitive areas... but not separately, because in such a way the knowledge is cut to pieces (Teacher D).

Two other preschool teachers stated the framework's cross-thematic approach helped them change their own approach to knowledge and their pedagogical strategies:

Cross-thematic approach for me means ... not putting limits. I cannot delimit knowledge... Everything is connected; we just have to see the connections... I believe the cross-thematic/curricular approach exists everywhere. I couldn't see it before, but now I can see that behind a theme of History, for example, Mathematics can exist...Neither as a preschool teacher nor as a student had I understood it. Now I consider that everything is open, everything is approached by the cross-thematic approach. (Teacher B1)

...in the beginning we were afraid of listening to the children, of leaving them free to expand on a theme; we were listening to the children talking about museums and anyone speaking about dinosaurs would be excluded. Now we can use it (Teacher B2).

Nevertheless, another preschool teacher remarked that the integrated curriculum is not a panacea. Like in real life, in kindergarten not all activities revolve around a theme:

I believe that, in our daily life as well, not everything revolves around a theme... I am not aware of everything revolving around a theme. Daily life isn't like this. We do not constantly revolve around a subject and then around another. (Teacher I)

Finally, two teachers referred to the difficulty they had in comprehending the term "cross-thematic approach" and the insufficient training they received so as to understand it:

What do we mean by the term cross-thematic approach? I believe that if it had been another term, it would have been better understood. We merge themes and areas. It is very simple. When I do mathematics, I can also do language... When I tell a fairy tale I can do plastic arts as well. We have just continued to discuss what cross-thematic approach is too much; we don't understand it and that's why we should have received more training (Teacher C).

Well, you, know, I don't know what cross-thematic approach means, I believe it is the extension of a theme to other individual themes, and obviously the children themselves are willing to engage in them with our help. I do not know if this is the right thing or whatever else it includes. During the various lectures they gave us, few [teachers] are those who understood it. They tell us about it, but reading from a book succinctly; no one came to our classroom to tell us how we can use the cross-thematic approach during daily activities with children ... You know, we don't know if we're doing it right or wrong (Teacher J).

Analysis of the transcripts revealed that most preschool teachers accept the emphasis of the curriculum in specific learning areas. One of them states there is actually no division of the curriculum into separate learning areas, as these are merged. Such a focus reflects one of the official models of the new preschool curriculum as a webbed model, where a theme of interest is webbed to curriculum content and subject areas, endorsing both the content of separate learning areas and the discourse of the cross-thematic approach to learning:

I believe the segregation of cognitive areas combined with the term cross-thematic approach is appropriate ... In the context of the cross-thematic approach these [the cognitive areas] are merged together; therefore the result is what should be. It is good that this segregation exists, but they [the cognitive areas] are not taught independently. It isn't like primary school (Teacher D)

The introduction of school-like learning areas seems to help teachers 'organise' their work with the children,

implying a traditional and technical-instrumental logic. Moreover, as the following extract indicates, the introduction of school like subjects is legitimised by the teachers, as it improves their professional status and confirms their professional work to parents and their colleagues in primary school.

The division into separate cognitive areas helps us organise the class better. It helps teachers know what they are doing. It stands outside. My colleagues in primary school say that we don't do anything [at school]. That we don't have any subjects. Therefore, this helps us show off our work... You are able to know what you are doing, to know your aims. It is more clear. I find it good, because we can also sort out these boxes in our brain. Now I am going to do this, I have this aim; I am going to work in this way... I will select this activity in order to achieve this. I believe that it's better rather than having all these things puzzled.... (Teacher F)

Finally, the introduction of subject learning areas is seen by teachers interviewed as facilitating the children's transition to primary school. Nevertheless, again as another teacher emphasises, there is a risk in the above approach, as teachers might begin to treat preschool as school. To avoid this development, the teacher explains, it is important for preschool teachers to implement the new curricula without losing the spirit of preschool tradition, which takes a great deal of training (Alvestad and Pramling Samuelsson 1999).

I believe it helps when the areas are separated. Like the way they follow afterwards in the primary school. It should exist in the kindergarten as well, if we say there should be a continuity with primary school, a rather rudimentary segregation ought to exist, in order to facilitate the children's transition to the first grade of primary school. At least with respect to the subjects they teach at the first grade of the primary school (Teacher E)

I don't disagree with it, as the child will be taught these cognitive areas later. I just consider these are integrated and we shouldn't be caught in the trap of teaching them separately... Preschool teachers being seized with panic to prepare children for primary school, they had been caught in this trap. They intended to bring first grade's level of the primary school to the kindergarten. That's why preschool teachers' education is important, so that teachers can know their work, know on what principles their work should be based. Because the primary teacher will tell you to prepare the child for primary school... (Teacher B1).

The Lack of Teachers' Professional Development

One important matter regarding curriculum change is whether the state provides resources to create opportunities for the teacher to gain new knowledge in the field of educational theory and practice (Alvestad and Duncan 2006). Almost all preschool teachers referred to the insufficient training they received with respect to the new curriculum framework. The following comments of the teacher illustrate the feelings of many teachers, who express their dissatisfaction with the training and support they received in order to work with a curricular framework which promoted a new and different view of learning and teaching from previous years. Moreover, the teacher refers to the need for changes in teacher thinking that ought to accompany this process:

We should have received more information and training on the curriculum framework. The teacher is sometimes commanded to implement things without having been convinced that she has to change her traditional practice and follow a new one. Therefore the teacher, who is the one who has to implement this process, has to be convinced ... why she has to change her practice ... (Teacher C).

Finally, one of the young teachers states that apart from the state's commitment to provide teachers with appropriate training, it is the teachers themselves who have to take the initiative for their professional development. In addition, he refers to the ways this professional development would have to take place:

Some teachers take this initiative themselves, because they want it. Many do not take it. They finish their studies and they just aren't interested in any new trends or plans. We too should help ourselves. And the training should take place in cooperation with us. We have to be taught in the same ways that we teach the children. Active participation of the teacher; simply attending a lecture isn't enough... (Teacher D).

Concluding Remarks

The study aimed to provide insights into the discourses and agendas that shaped the new preschool curriculum framework in Greece, shedding light on how preschool teachers make sense of it. Regarding their existing curriculum perspectives, teachers consider that curriculum in preschool education is necessary on establishing shared goals and visions enable to increase communication with their colleagues and with parents. Almost all participants con-

ceptualize the curriculum as open and flexible enough to be adapted to the children's needs and interests and the teachers' work contexts. From the analysis of teachers' words it seems that, to a large extent, the basis of their thinking and practice is the above mentioned *Preschool Teachers' Guide*, a document that constitutes an interpretation of the new preschool curriculum framework trying to bridge the gap between theory and complex practice. The lack of appropriate guidance and professional development to work with the new curriculum framework, a main concern raised from all the teachers interviewed, perhaps explains partly why most of them consider the PTG as the central document for their work. Because of the lack of appropriate teacher professional development, the PTG might be seen by teachers "not as a tool for creativity, but as a manual" (Brostrom 2003, as cited in Alvestad and Duncan 2006) and in this case, adopting 'best practices' as if were recipes, might have the potential to de-professionalize the teacher.

Talking with the teachers reveals that most of them consider that to a significant extent the new curriculum framework is differentiated from the previous one and they have welcomed its child-centred discourses. A significant feature of the new curriculum, that is, the cross-thematic approach to learning, even a vague and hard to understand and adopt concept by some teachers, was seen by several of them as positive and appropriate for preschool education. The analysis of the teachers' words indicated that official views about curriculum regulate teachers' practice by changing how they decide the content of curriculum (Kable 2001). Thus, several teachers adopt the official model of the new preschool curriculum content as a webbed model which endorses both the content of school-like learning areas and the discourse of the cross-thematic approach to learning. While similarities were evident in teachers' understandings of the curriculum, variations as well were identified. The introduction of the school-like learning areas is considered by some teachers legitimate as it improves their professional status whereas others emphasized that it could lead to the schoolification of preschool education. Further variations in teachers' interpretations of the curriculum seemed to be shaped by other parameters like the years of classroom experience. As we mentioned, older teachers seem to subordinate the curriculum to their real knowledge which is kept in their heads and validated by years of classroom experience.

The analysis of the findings bolsters Ball's (1994) argument that policies pose problems for their subjects, problems that must be solved in context. Teachers as agents made choices about how to use the documents and the extent to which they could incorporate them in their work. In this sense, the teachers are those who ultimately decide the fate of the curriculum. Although other factors

are seen to influence the process, it is the practice of teaching which will shape the learning taking place. That's why we argue that preschool teachers need assistance to gain new knowledge in the field of educational curriculum theory and practice and support, so as to be able to critically examine new definitions of the curriculum.

We consider that this study provided valuable insights into how preschool teachers made sense of a national curriculum text within complex and contradictory contexts and discourses. More research is needed to examine the implementation and understanding of national curricula by teachers in the field of early childhood education. As Kable (2001) noted, research that helps to explain the multiple factors that interact to shape how curriculum understandings are negotiated can contribute to ensuring that policy-making remains relevant to teachers, children and families in diverse local communities.

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