



Greek Pre-Primary Education From the Perspective of Capability Approach: Beliefs and Practices of Pre-Primary Teachers

Antoanneta Potsi, Research School “Education and Capabilities”, Bielefeld University

1 Background

The rapid changes that have occurred in the social, political & scientific domain can not leave the area of education unaffected. The demands of modern society dictate actions and the assumption of initiatives in new areas in order to change the role of school.

In light of the wider changes in the social reality, the pre-primary school units are expected to enact a more dynamic and active role in the contemporary social and educational affairs.

Greece’s educational indicators lag behind those of other OECD countries. Educational attainment in most age groups is below the OECD average. PISA results are low and the resources devoted to education are also below par. Participation rates in early childhood education & care are low, reflecting poor supply and quality problems as well as social preferences for home care.

PISA scores as well as the OECD reports concerning Greece have influenced the Greek educational policy measures that have been initiated with respect to the entire spectrum of the educational levels, including the pre-primary education. Among these measures, the curriculum reform (2002) consists a measure that was intensely criticized (Kitsaras, 2004, Chrysafidis, 2004). The curriculum outlines the directions for programmes regarding planning and development of activities in the context of the following subjects: Language, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Creation and Expression (through Fine Arts, Drama, Music, Physical Education), Computer Science. However, we can not estimate which aspects of the curriculum are implemented, because of the lack of assessment regarding teachers’ practices. Assessment is referred in the curriculum but only with respect to children’s performance.

Bearing this in mind, it is observed that there is a tendency to “schoolify” the pre-primary institutions, a fact which is a matter of concern for a number of educators and academics. This tendency provokes a controversy about the role and purpose of the kindergarten and its functional place within the society.

Pre-primary institutions not only offer knowledge but are also expected to stress innovation, to guide, create and strive to take the lead, to envision and to be more receptive to educational and social developments.

2 Rationale of the Research Study:

Beliefs are routed into our lives usually disguised with several kinds of names as attitudes, conceptions, perspectives, practical principles, repertoires of understanding. Harvey (1986) defined belief as an individual’s representation of reality that has enough validity, truth, or

credibility to guide thought and behaviour. Consequently, beliefs are considered as the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives.

Beliefs are a major influence on classroom decisions (Fang, 1996) and pre-primary school teachers make a myriad of decisions that affect the child's personality and development. Pajares (1992) in his effort to clarify the difference between knowledge and beliefs highlights that knowledge systems are open to evaluation and critical examination while beliefs are not.

Previous research indicates that teachers' practices are associated with their beliefs (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts & Hernandez, 1991; Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, Thomasson, Mosley, & Fleege, 1993; Smith & Shepart, 1988; Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, & Milburn, 1992), and that teachers filter new information through their personal beliefs (Kagan, 1992). Teachers' implicit theories about the nature of knowledge acquisition can affect teacher behavior and ultimately student learning (Fang, 1996). Therefore, it is imperative to identify teacher's beliefs so that we could estimate what impact beliefs have on the every day educational procedure in the pre-primary school.

In early childhood literature is praised the intrinsic value of play, imagination, thought, social and emotional development. The debate about these aspects is timely and yet timeless demonstrating their interrelation as well as their instrumentality in child's development. Theorists as Piaget, Vygotsky and Freud, but even more recent researchers as Gardner, Mayer & Salovey have been concerned for the meaning and the role of these components of human existence with regard to the development of the child.

The capability approach is a broad normative framework which can be used for the evaluation of inequality, poverty, well-being as well as for the measurement of other aspects of human life, pioneered by Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum.

The capabilities approach as a framework which aims at the expansion of human development and freedom is intrinsically attractive for educational science, especially for pre-primary education which its long-term effects are verified by well-known intervention studies ("The Chicago Child-Parent Centres", "High Scope Perry preschool Program", "Carolina Abecedarian Projects"). Pre-primary education constitutes the first educational step of the infant, contributing significantly to its socialization and development of its personality. The purpose of pre-primary education is to help children to develop physically, emotionally, mentally and socially within the context of the wider purpose of education.

So the selection of these specific capabilities is deeply contingent with the educational procedure of the pre-primary school. These capabilities are central aims of pre-primary education and are highlighted in all the well-known curricula of pre-primary education (see: Te-Wariki, High Scope, Experiential education, Reggio Emilia Approach, The Swedish curriculum).

In my study I intent to investigate the beliefs and the practices of the pre-primary teachers with respect to the following capabilities: Play, senses – imagination – thought, affiliation, emotions and senses. This attempt will reveal the perceptions of the pre-primary teachers and will provide us some insight of their daily practices in the classroom.

3 Research Questions

1. What is the impact of teacher characteristics (e.g. educational level, working experience, self-efficacy) on their beliefs regarding capabilities and academic goals ? Do these characteristics affect their beliefs in regards to what they believe to be important for the children?
2. What is the relationship between teachers' beliefs, their self-reported practices and the above mentioned characteristics?
3. Do pre-primary school teachers believe that providing the capabilities of emotions, senses-imagination-thought, affiliation, play, to children are significant? And if so, how does this imply to their pedagogical work?
4. According to the teachers, do these capabilities consist the ends in themselves or the means of the educational procedure in the pre-primary school?

4 Research Methods

Research instrument is the teachers' questionnaire, which is divided into four parts- demographic survey, checklist on teachers' beliefs, checklist on teachers' practices, and checklist on professionalization.

The questionnaire has been checked for the content validity by PhD supervisors and several experts in the field of pre-primary education in Greece. To test the quality of the first version of teacher questionnaire, a pilot study was surveyed in the middle of May 2010 with 31 pre-primary teachers, who are at the last year of the retraining program provided by the University of Ioannina. After that, the reliability of each measure in the questionnaire has been tested by employing Principal component analysis. A multiple regression analysis, factor analysis as well as cluster analysis will be employed in order to explore the background factors affecting the two types of teachers' beliefs.

Participants will be pre-primary school teachers (N=350) attending the 1st and 2nd year of a retraining program provided by five Universities in Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki, Ioannina, Rethimno, Aegean). In particular, participants with work experience ranged from 5-25 years will be sampled.

Participants were 341 pre-school teachers divided into two groups- 218 well-experienced and 123 less-experienced. Participants were recruited from re-training programs held by five Universities in Greece, namely, Kapodistrian University (Athens), Aristotelian University (Thessaloniki), University of Aegean (Rhodes), University of Crete (Rethymno), University of Ioannina (Ioannina). Furthermore, participants were also recruited from the Introductory Teacher Training Programs offered in PEK of Ioannina, 1st PEK of Thessaloniki and 2nd PEK of Thessaloniki.

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Author’s Address:

Antoanneta Potsi
Bielefeld University
Research School “Education and Capabilities”
P.O. Box: 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
E-Mail: anneta.potsi@uni-bielefeld.de
Phone: +49 521 106-6066
Fax: +49 521 106-89048

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