



Access to and quality of early childhood education and care in Greece

Yunanistan'da erken çocukluk eğitimi ve bakımına erişim ve kalite

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Abstract: The paper discusses issues related to young children's access to public nurseries and kindergartens as well as examining issues concerning the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in general and focused in Greece. The purpose of this paper is not only to highlight the various problems but also to contribute to dialogue for the upgrading and improvement of ECEC in Greece. This is why we pay much attention to official documents, especially those from International Organizations or from European Union.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care, Quality, Access, International Quality Indicators, European Context

Öz: Bu makale küçük çocukların devlete ait kreşlere ve anasınıflarına erişimine yönelik bir tartışma sunmasının yanı sıra Erken Çocukluk Eğitimi ve Bakımında (EÇEB) kaliteyi genel bağlamda ve Yunanistan bağlamında ele almaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı yalnızca çeşitli sorunlara dikkate çekmekle kalmayıp aynı zamanda Yunanistan'daki EÇEB'nin daha iyi hale getirilmesi ve geliştirilmesine katkıda bulunmaktır. Bu nedenle resmî belgelere, özellikle Uluslararası Kuruluşlardan veya Avrupa Birliği tarafından yayınlananlara çok dikkat ediyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken çocukluk eğitimi ve bakımı, kalite, erişim, uluslararası kalite göstergeleri, Avrupa bağlamı

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous international studies and research data provide compelling arguments regarding how critical the period of childhood is (until age 8: General Comment No. 7, 2005), for physical and emotional health, education achievement, social integration and overall success and happiness in the life of a child (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010; Proulx & Lye, 2016; Raikes & Shaeffer, 2016).

One would expect the society or the state to give absolute priority to the provision of equal developmental opportunities for all children in order to offset the various inequalities and inequities, as well as to investments related to children, especially when we know that timely support during childhood proves to have multiple benefits not only for the children themselves, but for society as a whole (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). The profound importance of early childhood has been recognized recently more than ever before. The new sustainable development agenda (United Nations, 2015), adopted by numerous countries worldwide amongst which Greece, has set a number of goals (Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs), including -for the first time explicitly- the early childhood development (SDG 4.2). At the same time, some of the greatest organizations join forces to urge greater investment in early childhood development (World Bank and UNICEF, 2016). World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEPE) Declaration 2017 “appeals to governments to comply with the financial commitments related to the development and sustainability of ECCE, ensuring with urgency: to give priority and increase public spending on ECCE, to allocate the necessary resources for equity and quality in ECCE, and to ensure free and public ECCE, which guarantees the expansion of the rights of the most disadvantaged sectors.

Within this framework Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter ECEC), which corresponds to Level 0 in UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education (2011) and refers to the education of children prior to their entry into primary education (for a definition, see also: OECD, 2001), can only be at the centre of interest and constitute an absolute priority of every political, social and educational debate since it can not only contribute decisively to the school success and life course of each child (UNESCO 2010/2011; Vandekerckhove & Peeters, 2016) but can also bring about beneficial results for the whole of society (OECD: Starting Strong, 2001, 2006, 2012; McCuaig, Akbari & Bertrand, 2016; Van Belle, 2016; Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2015).

The importance of Early Childhood Education and Care

Taking on the one hand as commonly accepted that: “*Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is of prime importance. It is the foundation for successful lifelong learning, but also for social integration, personal development and later employability*” (European Commission, 2011), and on the other that “*ECEC can offer the highest rates of return during the learning cycle of an individual’s life, especially for the more vulnerable groups*” (Council of the EU, 2006), and, finally, taking into account “*the clear evidence that the ‘investment’ in very early childhood has incomparable benefits, not only for the receivers of the investment, in other words the children themselves, but more generally, for the societies in which they live and for the generations that will come after them too*” (OMEP, 2012) (see also Gertler, Heckman, Pinto, Zanolini, Vermeersch, Walker, Chang, & Grantham-McGregor, 2014; Lake, 2016; McCuaig, Akbari & Bertrand, 2016; Yoshikawa, Weiland, Brooks-Gunn, Burchinal, Espinosa, Gormley, Ludwig, Magnuson, Phillips, & Zaslow, 2013), we share fully the Council of the EU’s recommendation (2011) for the “*provision of universally available high quality ECEC*”.

In accordance to the above view, we strongly support the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 (“*By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education*”), arguing that quality ECEC is both a goal and “*a prerequisite for the kind of accelerated progress that will be required to achieve the SDGs – and ensure that no one is left behind*” (Albright, Mundy, & Beardmore, 2016: 23).

For all the above reasons, the issue of the quality of ECEC is extremely topical. However, the fact that not all programmes of early childhood education are equally effective should be taken seriously into consideration. Only those that can be characterised as high quality have long-term effects on personal, family and social development (OECD, 2010). As Penn aptly noted (2009: 7) in a report to the European Commission, “*ECEC is a good investment only when it is high quality. Poor quality ECEC may do more harm than good especially for children who come from vulnerable social groups*”. This point of view seems to have been accepted by the Council of Europe (2010: 4) who judged that “*participation in quality early childhood education and care, with specially trained staff and the suitable ratio of staff – children, produces positive results for all children and proves more beneficial for the more disadvantaged ones*”. Nevertheless, the issue remains of its adoption as a principle by the member-countries and its implementation in practice. Of course, the same issue is universal and does not concern only the EU as “*despite the vast amount of evidence for the benefits of quality*

ECCE, countries as well as donor agencies do not make the necessary investments to effect change in early learning" (Albright, Mundy, & Beardmore, 2016: 25), leaving too many children outside quality ECEC (UNICEF, 2012). However, improvements such as the increased enrolments in pre-primary education during the last years (Proulx & Lye, 2016) should not be either overlooked or overestimated.

(High) Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

According to Proulx & Lye (2016: 24), "*access to quality ECE [...] can improve child outcomes and reduce inequalities in children's development and school readiness*". In that case, the definition and conceptual elucidation of concepts such as "*quality*" and "*highquality*" is necessary. Although these concepts are difficult to define precisely, nevertheless the international bibliography provides a multitude of interpretations, perspectives and parameters. While we are familiar with a number of them (e.g. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005; OECD, 2006; CoRe, 2011), for the present report we preferred the following, firstly because they include plenty of criteria related to what has already been mentioned and secondly due to the clarity and the measurability of their criteria:

- a) UNICEF (2008). *The child care transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*. Report Card 8. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.
- b) *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children*. ECNC: European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women Proposals for a Ten Year Action Programme (1996).

The first reference (UNICEF, 2008) includes 10 indicators: two are related to the policy framework, two relate to access to ECEC programmes, two concern the support environment and four are related to quality. (see Appendix I)

The second (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996) is a lot more detailed and includes 40 targets, distributed across nine axes, as follows:

- Policy framework: 6 targets
- Financial targets: 4
- Targets for levels and types of services: 5
- Education: 5 targets
- Staff-child ratios: 4 targets
- Staff employment and training: 5 targets
- Environment and health: 5 targets
- Targets for parents and the community: 3

- Performance targets: 4 (see Appendix II)

These two reference texts are linked to all the occasional recommendations of the European Committee after Barcelona (2002) and especially those contained in the texts: “*Early childhood education and care: Providing our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*” (European Commission, 2011) and “*Council Conclusions on early childhood education and care: Providing all our children with the best possible start for the world of tomorrow*” (EU Council, 2011). In such a case, a picture can easily be formed of how a framework can be determined which, even if it does not define what quality in ECEC is, at least describes the conditions which make it attainable. Based on this framework, we will then endeavour to discuss the improvement of ECEC in Greece.

Table 1. *Quality criteria in ECEC*

	UNICEF 2008	ECNC & EU recommendations
	Policy framework	
1	Parental leave of a year, on half pay	
2	National planning with priority given to non-privileged social categories	COMMISSION’S RECOMMENDATION Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage 20 February 2013 (2013/112/EU) Reduction of inequalities with investment in ECEC. Further development of social integration and the potential for the development of early childhood education and care (ECEC), using it as social investment for confronting the challenges faced by non-privileged children through timely intervention
	Access	
3	Subsidized care services for 25% of children under 3	At least 33% of children under 3 should be provided with a nursery school place
4	Subsidized early childhood education services for 80% of children from 4 years old	At least 95% of children from the age of 4 until the start of compulsory (primary) education should participate in early childhood education
	Quality	
5	80% of the staff working in ECEC should have special training	Maximization of the professional training of staff working in ECEC Initial training, continuous education and continuous professional development, corresponding to that of primary school teachers
6	50% of the staff working in ECEC should be educated to tertiary level	The specialized staff should receive the same salary as teachers 20% of the staff should be men (see, Note)
7	The staff/child ratio should not exceed 1:15 “in a safe, coherent, sensitive, encouraging and rewarding environment” (page 23)	1:4 for children under 12 months 1:6 for children aged 12-23 months 1:8 for children aged 24-35 months 1:15 for children aged 36-71 months
8	1% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) to be invested in ECEC	Public funding for services for small children should not be less than 1% of GDP , so that the targets may be met At least 5% of the above amount is available for support and advisory services including continuous or in-service training and at least 1% for research and monitoring There should be a funding programme for the construction of buildings and renovations which are linked to environment and health targets When parents pay for public ECEC services, the expenses should not exceed 15% of the net monthly income of the householders or the amount should be still smaller
	Support environment	

9	Child poverty should be below 10%	RECOMMENDATION OF THE COMMISSION Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage 20 February 2013 (2013/112/EU) “Reduce inequality at the young ages by investing in ECEC”
10	Universal access to basic health services	RECOMMENDATION OF THE COMMISSION Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage 20 February 2013 (2013/112/EU) Develop the correspondence of health systems to the needs of children from disadvantaged environments Improve support for the family and the quality of frameworks for care provision

The present survey focuses then on the access and quality indicators for ECEC in Greece and our fundamental aim is to provoke debate amongst all the interested parties for the setting out of a common plan/design for the improvement of ECEC in Greece.

ECEC in Greece

What is the state of ECEC in Greece, however, and how is this dealt with by the international community?

On 25th October, 2013, László Andor, the Commissioner responsible for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, in reply to the ND-EPP MEP George Papanikolaou, stated that: *Greece has not met any of the Barcelona targets for child care.*

A few months later, in the context of the Greek Presidency, the Ministry of Education and Religions organized a Conference in Athens (June 2014) on the issue “*Early Childhood Education and Care: More Quality for all*”. The state of ECEC in Greece was barely discussed at all, either formally or informally, during the conference, despite the fact that one would have expected it to be the focal point. In spite of this, and at the risk of being characterised as having utopian optimism, we will express our hopes and our wishes that the findings of the Conference, as they are laid out in the “*Proposal for a Quality Framework on ECEC: Report of the ET2020 Thematic Working Group on ECEC under the auspices of the European Commission*” (June 2014) which was adopted by the delegates, will form the basis of substantial improvement of ECEC in our country.

In this report we will not be concerned with the indicators regarding the policy framework and the support environment but, rather, we will focus on the indicators related to access and quality.

Indicators related to access to ECEC in Greece

Indicator 3: Subsidized care services for 33% of children under 3

Evidence from several studies illustrate the importance of providing ECEC to children under 3 years old (Paxson&Schady, 2007). But, with reference to the subsidized care services for **33%**

of children under 3, Greece seems to be far from meeting the target. More precisely, the European Commission (2009: 12) states that:

All the European countries have established ECEC services but in some countries (the Czech Republic, **Greece**, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom and Lichtenstein) there is extremely limited or no provision at all for public funding for children under the age of 3 and the participation rate in subsidized settings is very low.

More specifically, according to the most recent evidence concerning 2011, **in Greece roughly 19% of children under the age of three** are registered with a formal care provider in 2011 (EE-28 average 30%) (Eurydice Report, 2014: 65).

In its report (April 2014) UNICEF (2014:79) states:

(In Greece) there are certain problems related to the operation (of nursery schools and kindergartens), such as a lack of staff, the suitability of the infrastructure and equipment, the imposition of subsistence fees, exceeding the foreseen ratio of nursery/kindergarten teachers and children and so on. The greatest problem, however, of a broader nature, which was observed, is that the existing low-cost structures (chiefly public ones) are not sufficient to meet the needs of all the children, and as a result many families are forced to turn to private nursery schools, which means additional financial cost, or their children are not integrated at all into a service of this kind. The provision of free nursery care services through the relevant actions of the N.S.R.F. in recent years, while judged to be of critical importance, is not enough to cover the needs of the entire population.

In addition, UNICEF's reference report (2014: 80, 81) continues

As emerges from statistical data, the percentage of children from the age of 3 until the start of compulsory (primary) education that do not receive formal care is consistently greater in Greece in comparison with Eurozone countries and in fact in 2008 reached 45% of this child population, while in the Eurozone countries it ranges consistently at about 10%. Similarly, the percentage of children from the age of 3 until the start of compulsory (primary) education who receive formal care for more than 30 hours, is consistently smaller in Greece in relation to the Eurozone countries in which half the children receive corresponding care

Indicator 4: At least 95% of children from the age of 4 until the start of compulsory (primary) education should participate in early childhood education

With reference to this indicator, the European Commission Commissioner for Education, Androulla Vasileiou, in reply to the MEP George Papanikolaou (ND-EPP) on 7/6/2013 mentioned that “*The percentage in Greece is 73.5% (2010 data)*” (Vasileiou, 2013), while for 2011 it reaches 74.6% (Eurydice Report: 2014: 62). The average for the European Union of 28 countries is however 93% (op. cit: 61).

In another source (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013a), the relevant data provided for Greece (2011) are slightly differentiated and more precisely 76% is mentioned (with the average in the 27 countries of Europe being 93.2%).

Given that early childhood education is only compulsory for one year [the establishment of attendance at nursery school for children aged 5-6 as compulsory (Law 3518, article 73, GG 272 t. A', 21.12.2006) is a relatively recent achievement and the outcome of many battles and claims], from the above data it is not clear how many four-year-olds are excluded due to the fact that the available places are taken by the five-year-olds. The Eurydice Report (2014: 170) states that 54.3% of four-year-olds in Greece participate in early childhood education [European average for four-year-olds: 83% (OECD, 2012b)], while for five-year-olds the corresponding participation reaches 95.6%. These numbers reveal that a noteworthy large percentage of children don't attend two years of early childhood education. The issue of the demand for and establishment of compulsory attendance for four-year-olds too proves to be even more important, if we bear in mind that in the PISA contest (OECD, 2012b) the children that had attended early childhood education did better than those who hadn't and for this reason the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development as much as the European Union propose universal access of children from four years of age to early childhood education. It is worth noting here that OECD (2012a: 74) proposes, besides longer attendance in early childhood education, a reduction in the child-staff ratio and higher public investment per child so as to ensure the best possible quality ECEC provision.

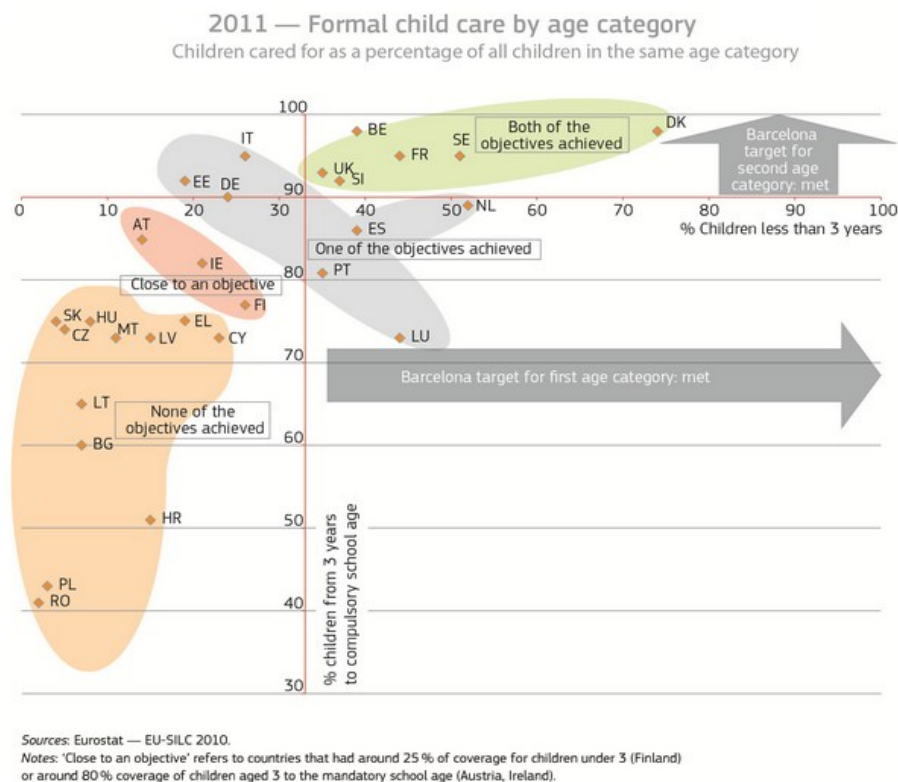


Figure 1. Greece among the countries that haven't met any of the European targets related to access to ECEC

The graph (retrieved from the “*European Commission Report on childcare provision in the Member States and study on the gender pension gap*”)¹ confirms and verifies what has already been said. One can then conclude, admittedly with excessive disappointment, that Greece - unfortunately- is among the countries that hasn’t met either of the two targets regarding children’s access to and their participation in early childhood education. Although it is comforting that in January 2018 the Parliament voted for the progressive inclusion of all 4 years old children to free of charge public preschool system.

Indicators regarding the quality of ECEC in Greece

Indicators 5 & 6: Professional training of nursery and kindergarten teachers

This indicator is the only one that, at least numerically, is in line with the target, which is the tertiary or university education of those who work in early childhood education. As is apparent in the Figure 2 that follows (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013b: 26), those employed in ECEC in Greece are tertiary education graduates, which means that they are graduated from Universities after attending four years program in which practicum is included (see also Eurydice Report, 2014: 99).

However:

- a) The indicators should be seen as interrelated, interconnected and interdependent factors. Quality cannot be achieved without the fulfilment of all targets.
- b) Among other things, the initial training (e.g. students’ teaching practice), the continuing education of active nursery and kindergarten teachers (for more, see: CoRe, 2011), the lack of support from specialised staff (e.g. psychologists, speech therapists, work therapists) and the bureaucratic load on the shoulders of the nursery heads, are worrying. As noted by Vandekerckhove & Peeters (2016), “*guaranteeing quality demands a qualified workforce, in terms of not only initial training but also continuous professional development, with a balance between theory and practice*”, while Ionescu, Josephson & Neuman (2016) underpin the importance of the teachers’ appropriate training, monitoring and mentoring, good recognition of their profession and decent working conditions.

¹ 3/6/2013: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-490_en.htm

● **Figure A2a: Level and minimum length of initial teacher education of pre-primary and primary teachers, and the minimum proportion of time spent on professional training, 2011/12**

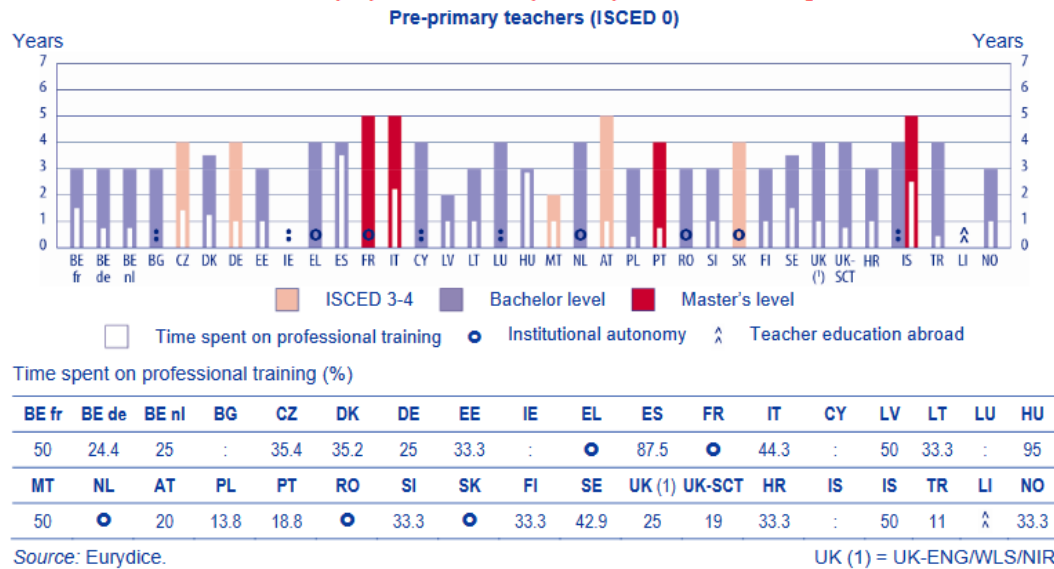


Figure 2. The initial training of ECEC teachers

Indicator 7a: Staff/child ratio 1:15 (for nursery school)

One of the factors that the Council of the European Commission links to high quality ECEC is the child/staff ratio: More precisely, it is recognised that “*participation in high quality ECEC, with highly specialized staff and a suitable child-staff ratio, produces positive results for all the children and has greater benefits for the more disadvantaged*” (Council of the EC, 2010:5). Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development finds that “*research shows that the ratio 1:15 in nursery schools is the highest limit for children under five years of age [...] and that for more individualised attention, lower ratios are more suitable*” (OECD, 2004:59).

This ratio has been adopted and is recommended as the highest desirable by other international organizations such as Education International (2010) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC: 2005), while at the same time it is the target that the Teaching Union of Greece aspire to (745/15-2-2012).

Likewise, the International Labour Organization (2013: 40) seems to be even more demanding regarding this indicator, recommending a staff/child ratio of 1:10 and 20 as the highest number of children per nursery class, with two teachers. Once again, however, in contrast to the above, one finds that in Greece the situation is determined differently:

a) “The number of infants per nursery teacher is set at 25 infants” (JMD, 2006)

- b) “In exceptional circumstances, the number of pupils in primary schools and infants in the infants’ schools can, with a decision by the appropriate Director of Primary Education, exceed the pupil per teacher and infants per infant teacher ratio by 10%, as this is laid down in the above JMD” (JMD, 2013)

Bearing in mind relevant research which notes that the teacher/child ratio is related as much to the learning outcomes (OECD: Starting Strong III, 2012: 18), since it permits the individualized attention and more frequent interaction (NAEYC, 2005), as to safety, since the teacher has to look after a smaller number of children, one understands that the relevant provisions that are valid in Greece should be subject to immediate review.

Indicator 7b: An environment which is safe, encouraging, rich in stimuli and potential for play and investigation

The answer that could be given to the question posed by teachers, parents, scientists and others regarding which environment could be considered “*safe, encouraging and rich*” could be found in Targets 30-32 which are included in the European Network on Childcare (1996: 33). More precisely, the following are recommended:

“Internal space of at least 6 square meters for each child under three years and of at least 4 square meters for each child 3-6 years (excluding corridor and storage or through-way space)

“...direct access to external space of at least 6 square meters per child”

“...an additional 5% of internal space for adult use.”

Naturally, as with the previous indicators, in Greece the provision is for 2 square meters of internal space per child (Presidential Decree 71/1988 & Ministerial Decision 8185/2474/1991 – Government Gazette 360, V. A’).

Regarding this issue, the Greek Committee of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) noted in a resolution in 2008:

The significant shortages in the spaces of the infant schools, besides the problems of safety and health, make difficult, if not inhibit, the pedagogical work that the infant teachers are called on to perform, and they downgrade the contribution and the role of early childhood education.

In addition, the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child (2012: 16) notes:

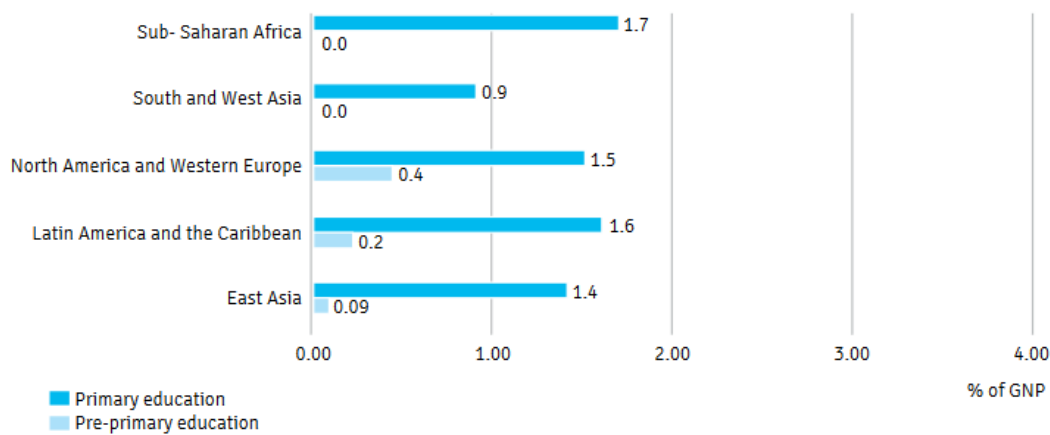
A number of schools in Greece continue to be housed in old buildings, in prefabricated classrooms (‘containers’) or to offer inadequate playgrounds, with negative consequences for the quality of the education provided and the safety of the pupils.

Recently operational problems have also been noted due to the lack or delay of funding, something which leads from time to time to serious shortages in maintenance, heating and in the supply of essential expendable goods.

We could conclude that there seems to be a great divergence between, on the one hand, what is foreseen and recommended regarding this indicator and, on the other hand, the existing structures in the Greek schools. The building infrastructure of the contemporary nursery schools cannot be considered satisfactory (ind.Vrinas, 2010). The provisions of the School Buildings Organization (SBO, 2008) are not implemented in practice, except in a very few cases, and the general picture of many nursery schools can only be described as sad and dangerous for the safety of the children.

Indicator 8: 1% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is invested in ECEC

Data from different organisations and surveys confirm that early childhood is currently underfinanced and many countries spend less on pre-primary than on primary education (McCuaig, Akbari & Bertrand, 2016; Putcha, Upadhyay & Burnett, 2016). Although, as it is shown in the following graph, western Europe countries' expenditure on pre-primary education approaches the number of 0.4% of GDP on average.



Source: UNESCO

Figure 3. *Public expenditure on pre-primary and primary education as a percentage of GDP by region, 2012 (UNESCO, 2015)*

Given the above, one would expect that Greece approaches the average spending on ECEC of the other EU countries. But, once again, this does not happen. In a related question (E-004685-13) on 26th April 2013 on the “*comparative level of public spending on early childhood education amongst member states*”, George Papanikolaou, MEP ND-PPE, received from the Commissioner for Education of the EC, Ms Androulla Vasileiou, the following answer: “*Data*

for Greece has not been updated in recent years". Indeed, in the Commissioner's reference¹ the fact is noted that Greece hasn't sent data since 2004. Simultaneously, Greece appeared to diverge significantly from all the other groups of nations and, indeed, showed a decrease between 2002 and 2004 in contrast to all the other groups.

GEO/TIME	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
European Union (28 countries)	0.50	0.49	0.49	0.49	:	:	:	:	0.56	0.57
European Union (27 countries)	0.50	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.51	0.55	0.56	0.57
European Union (25 countries)	:	:	:	:	0.50	0.49	0.50	0.54	0.55	0.56
Euro area (18 countries)	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	:	:	:	:	0.57	0.56
Euro area (17 countries)	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	:	:	:	:	0.57	0.56
Euro area (15 countries)	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.52	0.56	0.57	0.56
Euro area (13 countries)	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.52	0.56	0.57	0.56
Greece	0.17	0.11	0.11	:	:	:	:	:	:	:

Figure 4. Eurostat: Public investment in early childhood education (ISCED 0)

In the more recent survey (Eurydice Report, 2014: 80), Greece is the only country for which relevant data is not recorded.

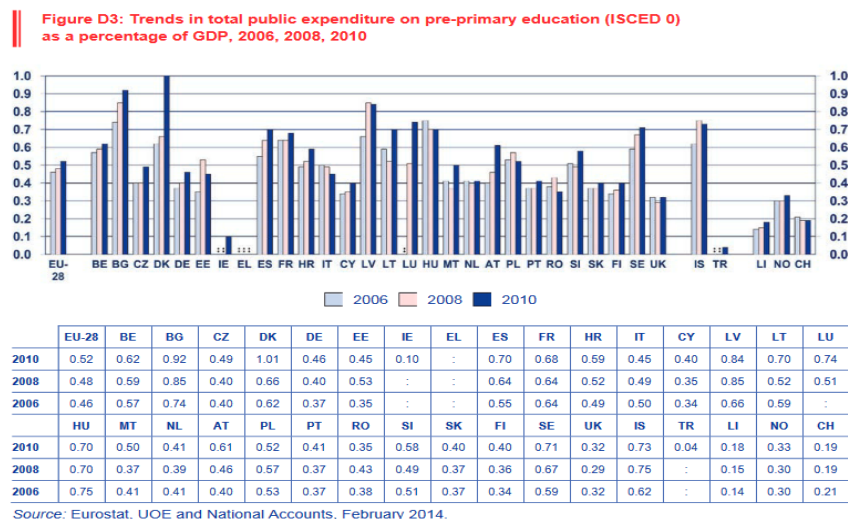


Figure 5. Eurydice 2014

¹http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do;jsessionid=9ea7d07e30d89eb2ffd185bb4c478847d830f3057473_e340aN8Pc3mMc40Lc3aMaNyTbx0Pe0

Furthermore, the Education Department of the then (2012) opposition party verified the reasons for the non-updating of data on the part of the Greek political leadership, claiming in an announcement on 12.11.2012 how in the budget for 2013 total spending on education amounted to 2.51% and **for ECEC less than 0.1% of GDP**. If this is true, it is apparent that Greece has the smallest spending on ECEC out of all the member states of the European Union, approaching the average of developing countries worldwide (0,07%) (UNESCO, 2015).

So, a reasonable question arises:

Why, in contrast to other recommendations of the European or International Organizations, are the recommendations for quality ECEC not respected, or indeed given priority, by the Greek government, since it has been proved that “*the benefits of a high quality ECEC are on a broad scale: socially, economically, and educationally.*”[COM (2011) 66: 17.2.2011]?

DISCUSSION

We believe that civilization, the quality of its accomplishments and the vision of a society for its future, which is none other than its small citizens, is reflected with the greatest possible clarity in the nursery schools. We refuse to accept that the condition of the nursery schools as it is today in Greece is an expression of the passion, the visions and the desires of its citizens. On the contrary, we believe that it is “*one of the most fundamental structural causes of the crisis we are experiencing today*” (Arvanitopoulos, former Education Minister, 8.5.2014) and, for this reason, if it is given the priority it deserves, it will contribute to a way out of the crisis, ensuring social cohesion, sustainable and just social growth, while at the same time it will ensure the best possible start for ALL the children who live in our country.

“**The real measure of a country’s position is how well it takes care of its children:** of their health and safety, of their material safety, their education and their socialization and the feeling that they are loved and valued by their families and the societies they live in” (UNICEF, 2007: 1).

Who can disagree that “*the future belongs to those countries that invest wisely in their children, while failure to do so undermines social and economic progress?*” ***The development of children is the cornerstone of every development***” (USA Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity (2012: 1).

A robust fund of research has proven that high quality preschool education is effective in supporting all young children and especially those who grow up in less privileged environments, belong to marginalised groups, or live in vulnerable conditions. If we consider this issue from the perspective of the Rights of the Child then it is clear that it is duty of the

government to give them every opportunity possible to succeed in education, and the foundational stage for this is ECEC.

We hope that to our voice and to our effort will be added many more still, which will make what is taken for granted, at least in European countries, a reality in Greece. For our children, for the citizens of tomorrow, for our future.

Limitations

The present report focused on access to and quality of ECEC in Greece and particularly in infant schools. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to find analytical data regarding nursery schools. In addition, data regarding the support of families (e.g. parental leave), children's health, children in danger of poverty or exclusion [the percentage of which is 33.2% (Eurydice Report, 2014: 17) significantly higher than the EU average], the falling birth rate [where Greece again appears in the group of countries that is especially affected (Eurydice Report, 2014: 23)], the youth unemployment rate and immigration are not included. These indicators, together with those referred to here, should be cause for reflection and should mobilize us, so as to fight to provide our children with the best possible start in life.

Proposals

The measures that should be taken and the changes that should be noted could, to a great extent, be characterised as ground-breaking but not utopian, in order to accomplish the goal which is none other than the improvement of access to and quality of ECEC in the folds of Greek society.

To start with, the Greek Government and the authorities should mobilize themselves, publishing the relevant data for ECEC in Greece.

In addition, the Greek government should, bearing in mind the disappointing data to date, lead an effective discussion on the formation of a realistic strategic plan for Early Childhood Education and Care, so that it can meet the social needs and come into line with the recommendations of the International Bodies and the commitments it has taken on in the EU. In this dialogue, the presence and active participation of representatives of the academic workforce of the country, teacher and parent organizations, as well as representatives from international scientific organizations, is seen as imperative. And this is so since the utilization of their socio-cultural features, with whatever convergences and divergences exist between them, can contribute to the maximum to the design and organization, not only of far-reaching but realistic and immediately applicable action strategies for the improvement of ECEC in our country.

The inhomogeneity of the student population (socio-cultural, economic, educational, etc) should be taken into serious consideration in this planning, as should their co-existence at the micro-level of the school classrooms, so that children from vulnerable social groups are given priority to provision.

The interested parties should bring the importance of ECEC to the all-rounded development of the child (as is claimed in all the European early childhood education curricula), social justice and sustainable development, to the forefront of public debate.

In particular, as seen in the context of the current economic situation, investment in ECEC should be promoted by the interested parties as something which is not only socially just, but as something which has multiple short and long term benefits (ind.Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman& Elder, 2011), which make it one of the wisest and most financially profitable investments (see Calman&Tarr-Whelan, 2005). The words of Nobel laureate in economics (2000) James Heckman are absolutely in line with the above position: “*Timely investment in early childhood allows us to shape the future. Investment later simply forces us to correct the lost opportunities of the past*” (Heckman, 2011).

Note:The increase in the number of men working in ECEC is expressly referred to in the recommendations of the Committee of the Permanent Representatives to the Council of Europe (Brussels, 6th May 2011, 9424/11: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EL&f=ST%209424%202011%20INIT>)

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APPENDIX I

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Policy framework	
1	Parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary
2	A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children
Access	
3	Subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3
4	Subsidized and accredited early childhood education services for 80% of four year-olds
Quality	
5	80% of all child care staff trained
6	50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualification
7	Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education
8	1% of GDP spent on early childhood services
Support environment	
9	Child poverty rate less than 10%
10	Near-universal outreach of essential child health services

APPENDIX II

Targets for the quality of services directed at small children (to 5 years old)

These targets have been developed by the European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women: Proposals for a Ten-Year Action Programme (1996), which can be found on the webpage: http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/user_upload/files/thematic_priorities/Yearly_years/EC_Childcare_Network_Quality_Targets_in_Services_for_Young_Children_1996.pdf

In addition, it is included in the “Early Childhood Education and Care Services in the European Union Countries: Proceedings of the Child on Europe Seminar and Integrated review. (2010). IstitutedegliInnocenti di Firenze. (pages 81-84), which can be found on the webpage: http://www.childoneurope.org/issues/publications/ECEC_Report_rev.pdf