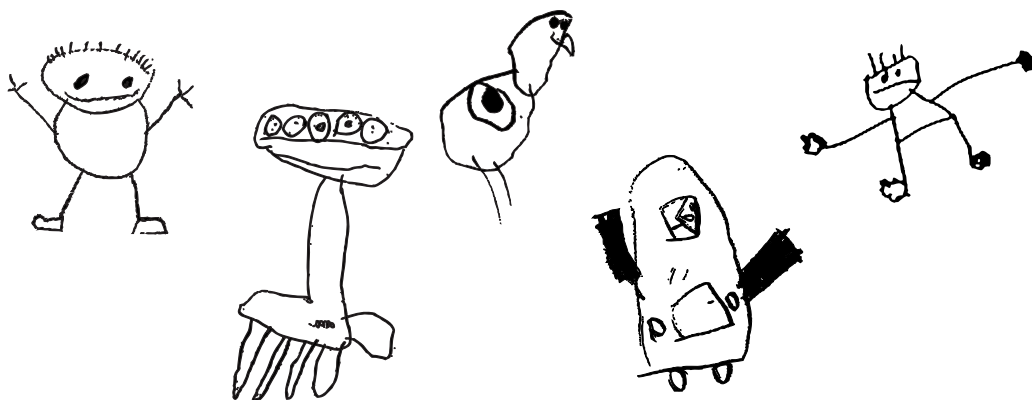




An Leanbh Óg

An Leanbh Óg- the OMEP Ireland Journal
of Early Childhood Studies.

Vol. 9, Issue 1, April 2015



Edited by
Rosaleen Murphy, Patricia Radley and Anna Ridgway

Published by OMEP Ireland

Published by OMEP Ireland 2015.

OMEP Ireland is the National Committee for Ireland of OMEP.

OMEP:

L'Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire

World Organisation for Early Childhood Education and Care

Organización Mundial para la Educación Preescolar

An t-Eagraíocht Dhomhanda um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

OMEP Ireland/ OMEP Éireann: An Eagraíocht um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

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Published by OMEP Ireland, c/o School of Education,
University College Cork

Website: www.omepireland.ie

Email: info@omepireland.ie

ISSN 2009-5910 (Online)

ISSN 2009-5902 (Print)



Typeset by
www.chandlerbookdesign.co.uk

Printed and bound by
4 Edge Limited

Teaching spelling in pre-primary education: Preschool children's texts about their world(s)

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Abstract

This paper discusses practices about the teaching of spelling in pre-primary education. In Greece, even though the Curriculum adopts an emergent literacy perspective, kindergarten teachers usually employ traditional practices for familiarising their pupils with the alphabetic code. During the spring term of school year 2013-14, the author was invited as a critical friend by a kindergarten teacher in order to organise writing activities for the 23 pupils of her class, who were in the second year of pre-primary education (mean age 65 months). The children were encouraged to engage in discussions about their activities in their homes and school, to compose texts and share them with their peers and later with their parents. During the writing sessions the teacher and the author had the chance to act as mediators of literacy and provide each child with specific support. Thus, spelling instruction was given to children individually in short time interventions, which had to do with specific obstacles encountered by the child. This intervention was part of a problem solving procedure and the children were supported to find the solution by themselves using various texts from the classroom.

Key words:

early literacy, spelling, alphabetic code, composition of texts, literacy events

Introduction

The Curriculum "Cross Thematic Curriculum Framework for Compulsory Education" (CTCF) for language teaching in Greek pre-school settings (Ministerial Decision 21072b/G2/ Government Paper 304/13-3-2003), follows the current international trends and adopts an emergent literacy perspective (Tafa, 2008). It emphasises print-rich classroom environments and children's active engagement in playful literacy activities, through which children understand that we read and write in order to communicate with others and express our thoughts, ideas and emotions (Tafa, 2001). Teachers have to shape a context for learning (Cloran, 1999) and foster children's active participation in literacy events (Heath, 1982). Teaching of spelling is mentioned twice in the Curriculum: first in the section concerning "oral communication – listening and speaking" and second in the section concerning reading. In the first one, the target proposed is the acquisition of phonological awareness and it is explained that *"Through songs, counting-out games and rhymes children become aware of phonemic aspect of language and they become able to discriminate the phonemes as elements of words"*. In the second, the target is the gradual realisation of letter-sound correspondence and it is explained that children should be *"encouraged to seek solutions, discuss and puzzle as they try to 'read' without being corrected or imposing the correct 'reading' each time"*. In the section concerning "spelling and writing communication" it is mentioned that children should be encouraged to write *'as they can'* and it is stressed that it is of great importance for children to acquire motivation and the possible 'mistakes' should be accepted and be reclaimed in the learning procedure. Moreover, in the Curriculum there is an explicit declaration that the systematic teaching of spelling takes place in Grade A of primary education.

Thus, the kindergarten teachers have to reinforce children's 'natural' literacy experiences (Hasan, 1996) by engaging them in authentic communicative situations and by giving them the chance to use their previous knowledge in order to acquire new knowledge. Unfortunately, either because of a long tradition in educational practice in Greece (Stellakis & Kondyli, 2009) or because of the lack of organised educational programs for in-service educational staff (Stellakis, 2012), kindergarten teachers seem to persist in teaching alphabetic code in a very traditional way. They seem to conceptualize literacy as a set of cognitive skills that should be explicitly taught. In other words, they seem to accept the "autonomous model" (Street, 1995) and practise only "recognition literacy" in Hasan's (1996) terms. These kind of

practices include teacher- initiated activities in which children are asked to write or over-write different kinds of curves, shapes or line patterns on pre-writing sheets, learn a letter by tracing either the letter or words starting with it and copying words or short texts. To sum up, based on the distinction between 'being able to read' and 'being a reader' (Eurydice, 2011:7), kindergarten teachers in Greece seem to pay much attention to the first, which means that they use practices which do not match with the principles of the Curriculum.

The programme

The author, during a seminar about early literacy practices in kindergarten, organised by the regional Educational Counselor for kindergarten teachers in the area of Patras, was invited by a participant teacher to organise some writing workshops in her kindergarten. The invitation was accepted and children's parents were informed about this initiative. Before visiting the class the author had some discussions with the teacher about early literacy practices and emergent literacy perspective. Based on the assumption that most of the children would be either in pre- alphabetic spelling phase or partial alphabetic, the teacher was provided with the following definition, especially for writing. Any effort to write down a message addressed to someone else by employing (quasi) linguistic and/or any other signs or drawing is considered as written text (Stellakis & Kondlyli, 2009). Moreover, the term "mediator of literacy" was explained to her (Kucer, 2009), specifically how we could support children to find the letters they needed using the environmental print in the classroom (Kirkland, *et al* 2006; Giles & Tunks, 2010) and how we should write down the texts dictated by the children. Finally, before starting the intervention the author visited the classroom several times in order to be accepted as teacher by the children.

The programme took place the spring of the school year 2013- 14 in a kindergarten in the area of Patras. The classroom had 23 children, 8 girls and 15 boys, the mean age of whom was 65 months. All the children were in the second year of pre-primary education. The class had one teacher with two years' experience in education and all children had Greek as their native language. As far as the socio-cultural background of children's families is concerned, we could say that for the vast majority it was typically middle class.

The author visited the classroom three times per week for a period of three months. During his visits he organised a reading aloud session, and later on he conducted workshops, with half of the children each time.

The division of the class into two groups was necessary because with the whole group it was impossible to have a deep discussion and provide personalised assistance. Each writing workshop consisted of three parts: a) a discussion about a topic concerning children's lives, b) writing a text about the topic, and c) sharing the text with the whole group.

The topics which were discussed had to do with children's interests (movies, books and activities), their families, their play activities in home, school and the neighbourhood and persons whom the children admired. Sometimes the topic was brought to the group by the children themselves. For example, after reading the book "When my father is not at home" (Pin, 2007) the children suggested we discuss their fathers' work, and another day, someone suggested discussing and writing about heroes we have met. Actually, in discussion it emerged that the child meant someone we think is important to us and whom we admire for some reason.

During the writing part of the workshops, the children were invited to put their message on paper 'as they can'. From the beginning we let them know that if they needed assistance, they just had to let us know. If just drawing was enough for them, we encouraged them to write their name on the paper and we asked them if they would like to dictate something. In most cases children liked to attempt writing. Most of their questions were about certain letters. We did not respond immediately to that question. Instead we asked them "where do you think you can find this letter?" In most cases they were able to find the letter somewhere in the classroom, on the board with their names and photos, in the diary or on the map. Greek, as far as the phoneme - grapheme correspondence goes, is a relatively transparent language (Manolitsis & Tafa, 2009), which means that it is not difficult to identify a letter since its sound is almost always the same. In this particular class, seventeen out of twenty four letters were immediately accessible by their names. In any case, any of the children's attempts to spell was accepted with appreciation.

In order to understand how each workshop was organized, I will refer in detail to the first one which was about playing alone in the house (Pictures 1 & 2). Children shared their preferences and, since there were a lot of ideas, we discussed about how we could put them all in a paper. A child suggested dividing a paper into sections, like a strip cartoon in a comic. This proposal was accepted, but then we had to discuss about how many sections were enough: two, four, six or more. We decided on six, because fewer was not enough and more than six were too small to be drawn. Then the children were asked if they also would like to have a small space for writing, like in comics. We decided to

have a small space for writing because *"sometimes people do not understand the drawing and it is better to explain it"*. After composing their texts children read them to the group and, later, they put them on a board in order to be able to read them, either individually or to the whole class.

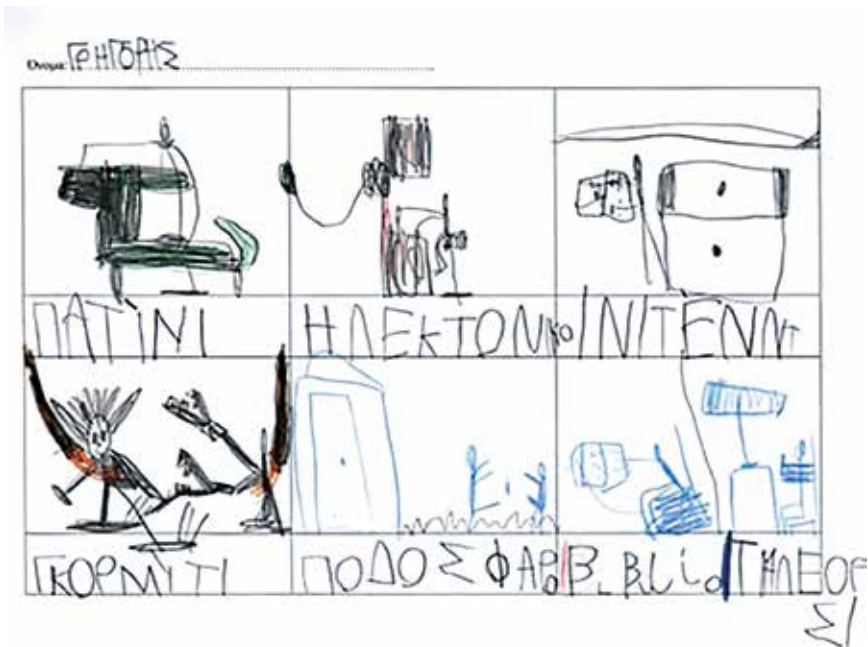
During the writing workshops children produced texts about the following topics:

- My free time (Pictures 1 and 2)
- My family (Picture 3)
- My room
- When my father is not at home
- I will always love my mother because
- My grandparents
- The animal I like more
- I want to travel to...
- My beloved hero
- What profession I want to do (Picture 4)
- My favourite TV programme (Picture 5)
- A person I like
- A place I like
- Our kindergarten (Picture 6)
- My favourite learning corner
- My friends (Picture 7)
- Become a friend of mine because...

In many cases, children used photos from magazines but also their own photos in order to compose their texts. Often they were satisfied with the drawing but sometimes they were bored or even frustrated with trying to spell. On the other hand, in some cases they put a lot of effort into trying to compose short texts. For instance the text "Become a friend of mine" was the result of a discussion about their transition to primary school. They seemed to be a little bit anxious about losing their friends and finding new ones. For this reason they decided to 'advertise' themselves and compose texts about the reasons they can be good friends. They were really enthusiastic and they spent much more time in this task than the time they spent during the other workshops.



1: Panos' text about his free time: "Watching TV, video games, playmobil, tennis, making juice and playing outside". In tennis (TENS) he has written his first letter and his mother's name "N" for Dina.



2: Gregori's text about his free time: "Scooter, video games, NINTENDO, Gormiti, football, books, TV". He has separated the last picture into two.



3: Thodoris' family. He has written the names above the heads.



4: Dimitris wants to become a scientist for birds, because he expects to find new species.



5: Marina's favorite TV program is Barbie Merliah, because she is a good surfer and she plays with waves.



6: Panagiotis' favorite activity in the playground. "I like to do tricks on the bar.



7: Eleanna's best friend is Matina. She has dictated: "Matina is my best friend. I love her very much. We play together nice. We have fun. We draw. She has beautiful eyes. She helps me with the letters".

Concluding remarks

When I accepted the invitation to organize the writing workshops in this kindergarten I could not imagine the results, partly because I did not know the children. When the school year came to its end, every child had a file full of texts about herself or himself. After a discussion with the children, we decided to make an exhibition and invite our parents and friends to see it. It's needless to elaborate on the participants' enthusiasm. The parents, especially, could hardly imagine that their children could compose texts with such rich ideas. After the exhibition, the texts were put in files and the children took them to their homes in order to read them to their friends. We also suggested to them that they should take their book to primary school and show it to their teacher and their new classmates. Moreover, all the texts were scanned in order to be used in seminars about early literacy practices for in-service kindergarten teachers. For that reason all the parents gave their permission.

The children did not hesitate to participate in these literacy events (Heath, 1982) and act as writers. They did know that they did not know to spell in the correct way, but their desire to share their preferences and dreams helped them to overcome any kind of fear.

Based upon Freire's suggestions (1985), we see literacy as a dialogue between participants rather than a 'top-down', one-way teaching. For that reason we tried to stimulate children to think about their own lives and codify it in pictures and/or texts, to think critically about certain aspects of their lives and to share their views with others. We tried to show them that writing has to do with the communication of ideas, and learning to spell is useful because it helps other to understand our message. Even though there is no a simplified way to engage children in the complex activity (Clay, 2001) of composing a text, this programme showed a possible way to facilitate children's interest in print and to scaffold their attempts to compose texts.

If early writing is one of the best predictors of children's later reading success (NELP, 2008) we should ensure our children have the chance to express themselves by writing. Although we do share the concerns about the 'schoolification' (Alock and Haggerty, 2013) of early childhood education, we tried to show a possible way to teach writing, by using it for strengthening children's voice.

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