Greek kindergarten teachers' beliefs and practices in early literacy

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Abstract

This work describes a survey conducted in Syros Island in Greece. The intention was to ascertain kindergarten teachers' perceptions about early literacy and the skills and knowledge they consider as important for pre-school aged children. The participants were all the kindergarten teachers of the island ($N = 19$) and the data were collected during a workshop where three groups tried to make a conceptual map of 'literacy'. The results show that, overall, kindergarten teachers adopt a very broad definition of literacy as communication ability but restrict their practices to phonics instruction. Because this attitude differs significantly from the provisions of the official curriculum, which is based on emergent literacy perspective, it is obvious that due to the lack of specialised education and support the participants prefer a hidden curriculum, which is based on the assumption that mere acquaintance with graphophonemic relations is enough for the initial level of education. The findings of this research show that teachers lack awareness of recent research and pedagogy concerning early literacy development and demonstrate the urgent need for development of specialised educational programmes for in-service kindergarten teachers.

Key words: kindergarten teachers, beliefs and practice, early literacy

Introduction

Following the international trends in early literacy learning a new curriculum for language learning in Greek pre-school settings was published in 1999 (Ministerial Decree C1/58, 1999). This curriculum adopted an emergent literacy perspective (Tafa, 2008). It emphasises the importance of a print-rich classroom environment 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). The role of the adult (parent, teacher) in fostering a child's literacy behaviour through active participation in literacy events (Heath, 1982) is of crucial importance (Clay, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), because it shapes a context for learning (Cloran, 1999). Because differentiated socio-cultural family positioning creates different contexts for learning, the role of pre-school seems to be extremely important, especially for those children with limited exposure to written language.

Thus, kindergarten teachers become a key element in children's literate progress, as their choices determine the practices and the instruction taking place or being encouraged in their classrooms (Saracho, 1990). It is not an exaggeration to argue that kindergarten teachers' perceptions and beliefs about early literacy seem to be of vital importance (McMahon et al., 1998).

In a previous study Tafa (2002), through a questionnaire to 169 in-service kindergarten teachers on the island of Crete, found that the majority of the subjects agreed with the guidelines of the curriculum. On the other hand, they emphasised the fact that they lack relevant knowledge and support and they stressed their need for further education. Moreover, Kondyli and Stellakis (2005) argued that due to lack of knowledge kindergarten teachers do not embed literacy practices in school activities and in some cases they adopt traditional assumptions of literacy as teaching conventional reading and writing through skill-orientated activities. Finally, it should be taken into account that research in the field of early literacy seems to be polarised between two distinct models of literacy instruction in pre-school education. On one hand the cognitive or autonomous model suggests the direct and explicit instruction in phonics and grapho-phonemic correspondence. On the other hand the socio-cultural perspective suggests that attention should be directed to the processes of written language as a part of a more generalised social semiotic process (Aidinis and Kostouli, 2001; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; McGee, 2003; Street, 1984). This tension in research, the lack of knowledge about emergent literacy as well as the vagueness of some assumptions of the curriculum seem to shape a somehow fuzzy framework for kindergarten teachers. This survey tries to investigate Greek kindergarten teachers' perceptions and beliefs about early literacy. It is considered important to shape a clear picture of their beliefs because of their relation to practice and furthermore our intention was to understand kindergarten teachers' needs in the framework of a further educational programme for in-service kindergarten teachers.

Participants

This paper reports data from a workshop held on the island of Syros in June 2009. The participants were 19 female kindergarten teachers. In Greece kindergarten

teachers teach children from 4 to 6 years of age (age of entrance to primary education). For children aged five the attendance of kindergarten is compulsory. The workshop was organised by the educational counsellor of the area and the coordinator was the researcher, who is a lecturer. This workshop was the initial one of an educational programme lasting the school year 2009–2010 and its expansion was 70 hours, divided into 10 workshops of 6 hours each and a whole day presentation. Survey information indicated all teachers had tertiary qualifications. Four of them had graduated from 2-year professional schools, but later they had followed university-level education. Their years of teaching ranged from 1 to 25 years.

Even though a question about how participants' views about literacy were formed was not part of the workshop under consideration, we had the chance throughout discussions in various circumstances during the educational programme to come to some conclusions. The greatest sources of information were the curriculum, some short lectures given by the educational counsellor on the topic and the discussions among kindergarten teachers about the 'new' perspective. The last one seems to be the most important for them.

It is worth mentioning that the small number of participants limits the conclusions that can be drawn from this research. On the other hand, we argue that the sample could be considered indicative of the Greek situation.

Data collection and procedure

In order to discover the reservoir of knowledge and perceptions about early literacy of the participants they were asked to divide into three groups, each of which had to discuss and write on a large sheet of paper a conceptual map of early literacy. The scope of this target was clear to participants. The coordinator would like to hear their own perceptions and discuss them. There were no strict guidelines, because the participants are acquainted with the procedure from their work in kindergarten. This session lasted about 1 hour. After that each group presented its map and it was discussed. The whole workshop was recorded.

The presentations were transcribed and the data were analysed with the content analysis method (Gee, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Every statement was categorised according to Hasan's typology of literacy practices (1996). This typology, which shares many similarities with other typologies such as those proposed by Wells (1987) and Freebody and Luke (1990), encompasses three levels of constructing and communicating meaning of texts: (a) recognition, (b) action, (c) reflection. *Recognition literacy* involves mastering of written code and thus is related to phonology and orthography. *Action literacy* refers to the ability to use language for exchanging meaning and it is oriented

to development of dialectic ability. It is noteworthy that action literacy is connected with genre-based pedagogy of literacy. Lastly, *reflection literacy* is connected to critical thinking, interrogation and analytical thinking. It should be mentioned that these three levels of literacy practices do not signal a developmental progression but they are in some degree overlapping and interweaving (Unsworth, 2001). In the Greek Curriculum for Language in Pre-Primary Education all three levels are mentioned, even though not explicitly. More specifically, recognition literacy is mentioned by referring to phonological awareness tasks as well as the learning of sounds and names of letters and the use of punctuation. It refers to action literacy by emphasising reading activities with active participation of children, and to reflective literacy by emphasising the derivation of information from different sources and understanding writing as a means of communication that enables the transfer of information and the development of ideas (Tafa, 2008). Finally, according to the curriculum, teachers have to mediate and facilitate learning, to encourage and support children so that they approach knowledge through exploration, discussion, creation and an exchange of ideas (Tafa, 2008).

Results

In the Appendix the three conceptual maps of literacy are presented as closely as possible to the original format. At first sight it is obvious that the most common explanation of literacy is 'communication'. One of the groups has put the word 'communication' exactly below the word 'literacy' in the centre of its map. 'Desire of communication', 'incorporation to society', 'participation in various social contexts' seem to explain the participants' views of how literacy is connected to communication abilities.

The second common thing in the maps has to do with written code. With one exception (Group 1) the participants tried to avoid an explicit reference to alphabetic code. On the other hand, for Group 2 phonemic awareness and phoneme–grapheme correspondence seem to be crucial for managing communication. Moreover, Group 3 makes an explicit reference to coding for drawing meaning as well as maturation. For this group it seems that a reading readiness approach is still influencing their concepts of literacy. Children's experimentation with written language and active participation in communicative instances is the third common thing.

What seems to be surprisingly strange is that reading and writing are mentioned explicitly only by one group. Moreover, the reference to Freire's view of literacy as a way to reading the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987), stated by Group 2, seems to reflect previous reading but remained unconnected to other parameters.

In the following part we will try to summarise the presentations of the conceptual maps.

The first group started its presentation by referring to the multimodality of the conceptual map. "Whatever you see on this paper, letters, words, lines, contours is literacy". Afterwards, it was mentioned that literacy is a process to fulfil the need of communication and the ways one can use to solve this need. According to their view the most important word in their map is the word 'letter'. The final part of their presentation was dedicated to analysis of 'letter' as sound and as a symbol written on a paper, on a wall, a label or on computer screen. But "letter is before anything else a sound".

The second group made a clear and precise reference to the importance of phonemic awareness and phoneme–grapheme correspondence. After a short mention of literacy as synonymous with communication and the various ways children use to "write meaningfully such as drawings, sketches, etc." they analysed their opinion that in kindergarten children should be encouraged to break the code. "Even though we know that breaking the code is mainly work of primary education we do know that all of us employ such activities. We do 'push' children to understand how the code is working, but in a playful and meaningful way, at least when it is possible."

The third group connected literacy to any kind of learning to use appropriately any symbol system. They mentioned that "for us dance, mathematics, computer learning, traffic signs learning is literacy". Moreover, they stressed the importance of linguistic literacy, which is connected with alphabetic knowledge, and they mentioned that "it depends upon environmental factors and previous experiences as well as maturation". At the end they raise some queries, asking specifically if retelling a story is literacy and if sign language or Braille system are literacy.

The results indicate that the participants seem to range between a very broad and a very restricted code for definitions of literacy. On one hand all the groups demonstrated the idea that literacy is connected to communication and participation in social contexts. It seems like the participants have been influenced by the recent expansion of the notion of literacy (e.g. 'scientific literacy', 'media literacy', 'computer literacy', etc.) in any form of communication. As Halliday (1996, p. 340) has noticed, "in many instances the term literacy … comes to refer to effective participation of any kind in social process". On the other hand they developed their presentations around the importance of code breaking activities. It seems that participants considered it fundamental, at least for the kindergarten level of education, to introduce children to decoding skills. It is plausible to assume then that the participants restrict their perceptions of early literacy to recognition literacy. In other words, what seems to be important, at least, for kindergarten level of education

is the breaking of code: children's understanding of how the alphabetic code works.

What was totally unpredictable is the absence of any reference to the importance of reading both at home and in kindergarten. The participants seem to ignore one of the cornerstones of emergent literacy perspective: reading aloud to children (Bus et al., 1995; Wells, 1985). Through being read to children develop their thinking and reasoning (Neuman, 1998), enrich their vocabulary (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000; Lonigan and Whitehurst, 1998) and develop comprehension strategies (Karweit and Wasik, 1996). What seems to be important is that the participants do not seem to fully understand how reading activities are connected to literacy acquisition.

Moreover, the references to previous experiences seem to be connected with oral language. But as Purcell-Gates (2001) argues the construct of literacy implies written texts or written language and "emerging literacy needs to be concerned with the emerging conceptual and procedural knowledge of written language, including the reading and writing of that language" (p. 8). Written mode (Halliday, 1985) is distinguished by a great variety of vocabulary and sophisticated words, elaborated syntax (Bernstein, 1971) and decontextualised language (Snow, 1991). This seems to be implied in the Greek Curriculum where school failure, especially by children from non-privileged environments, is connected with "fail of acquaintance with expressions of language which are related to written language" (CTCFCE, 2003, p. 587). On the other hand, this official reference paper does not explicitly quote these 'expressions of language' in a direct way, which would be clear for the kindergarten teachers.

Discussion

Even though the participants demonstrate an almost solid knowledge that the concept of literacy has to do with communication, they fail to connect literacy to written language. They seem to lack the knowledge that speech and writing are both forms of communication but they have a fundamentally different organisation in structure, grammar, function and purpose (Halliday, 1985). Moreover they insisted on the importance of phonics instruction in kindergarten and they seem to lack any knowledge on the importance of reading. They seem to wrongly believe that writing is speech transcribed. As Knapp and Watkins (2005) have shown, writing is much more than that. It is plausible to assume that they view literacy as just a capacity to decode written symbols or spell accurately. Lastly, the participants seem to view their teaching role in a very traditional way–that of the teaching of letters as an isolated skill. They seem to entirely lack knowledge about the importance of the kindergarten teacher's role as mediator. According to Kucer (2009), the mediator unpacks the literacy event for the learner and

demonstrates the literacy processes helping the learner to become sensitive to particular aspects of literacy. It is plausible to assume that participants fail to utilise literacy events – a situation where reading or writing are integral to communication (Heath, 1982) and engage children in meaning making processes. Moreover, the participants seem to not understand that literacy is a process for mastering the more elaborated forms of language that are used in writing (Halliday, 1996). In conclusion, the participants seem to adopt the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984) viewing literacy as a technical skill.

The question which arises has to do with the extent these kindergarten teachers' perceptions reflect the practices they use in their classrooms. In any case, it is plausible to assume that the participants seem to ignore the presuppositions of the official curriculum. A previous study (Kondyli and Stellakis, 2006) based on observations of practice would seem to confirm the findings of my study, suggesting that little has changed in the past 5 years or so.

Two possible explanations could be given for the current situation. One is the theoretical fuzziness of the official curriculum and the other the lack of organised educational programmes for in-service kindergarten teachers. As far as the first explanation is concerned Koustourakis and Stellakis (2009) have already shown that the official curriculum fails to state the central dimensions of an early literacy programme and simply summarises in an unclassified manner the current huge bibliography of early literacy research. The second explanation has to do with lack or insufficient knowledge of early literacy development as well as the appropriate practices in kindergarten settings.

The sample of this study is a small one, but it was randomly selected and confirms that expressions by the participants regarding literacy and literacy practices are consistent with informal observations in Greek kindergarten settings. The findings are also consistent with relevant research in other countries like Australia (Ure and Raban, 2001) and Canada (Lynch, 2009). The need for education on early literacy practices seems to be the only way to overcome misunderstandings of kindergarten teachers about the literacy practices they are called to employ in their classes. Given the fact that literacy is the most important provision of any level of public education and the role of pre-primary education seems to be of crucial importance in children's road to becoming literate we argue that pre-school educators should have all the necessary theoretical qualifications as well as practical guidance and support in order to supply substantial literacy education to their pupils. Thus, it is of great importance that appropriate programmes of continued professional development are put in place for teachers so that they obtain practical guidance and support, based on rigorous research evidence. Moreover, national policy in early literacy should elaborate in much greater detail what it sees as effective literacy provision for this stage of education and it should ensure practitioners are fully aware of that policy.

In conclusion, the present findings show that kindergarten teachers do not recognise the critical role they play in the construction of literacy through their mediations. They seem to restrict their teaching to activities around the code and fail to serve as mediators (Kucer, 2009). Thus, in-service educational programmes should be very carefully organised and bring out the spectrum of pedagogical support to children who try to construct literacy by participating in meaningful literacy events (Heath, 1982).

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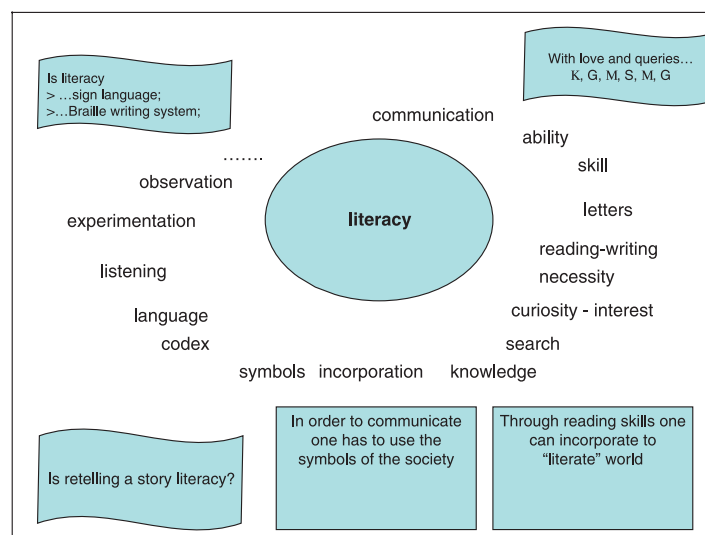e-mail: nekstel@upatras.gr

Appendix
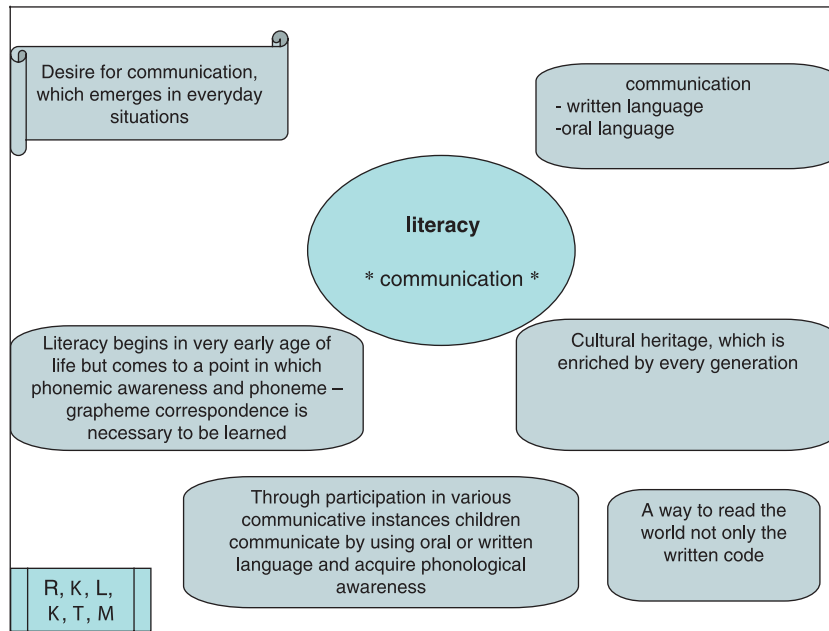

Figure 1: Group 1: Conceptual map of literacy
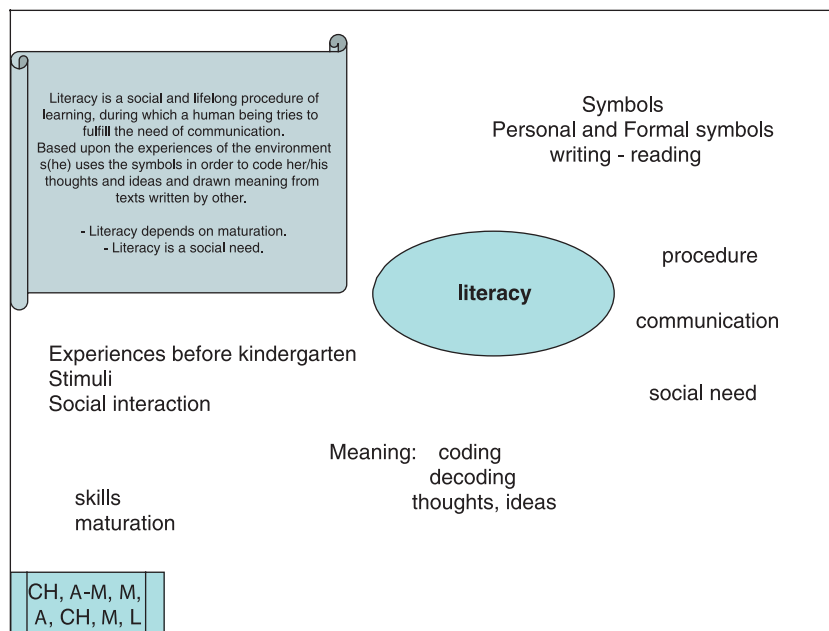
Figure 2: Group 2: Conceptual map of literacy

Figure 3: Group 3: Conceptual map of literacy