

MOTHERS' OF PRESCHOOL AGE CHILDREN BELIEFS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY AT KINDERGARTEN AND GRADE A OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Introduction

It is common knowledge that the literacy of children starts with their birth and is supported by the experiences taking place in the family environment (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker & Ganapathy, 2002; Watkins & Bunce, 1996). For this reason the literary practices in the child's first social environment are more and more researched in order to identify both the parameters associated with the later emergence of reading difficulties (Justice, Invernizzi & Meier, 2002; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998) and how different practices influence the achievement of literacy (Badian, 2000; Catts, Fey, Zhang & Tomblin, 2001; Leseman, & de Jong, 1998; Pan, Rowe, Singer & Snow, 2005; Scarborough, 1998; Senechal, 2006). However, there is little research on what parents believe could lead to the achievement of literacy, which as presented by Lynch, Anderson, Anderson & Shapiro (2006) is closely associated with the literacy practices their children are involved in.

Moreover, during the many training meetings with kindergarten teachers on literacy practices at kindergarten many teachers informed us of the pressure applied on them by parents regarding the systematic teaching of reading and writing skills at kindergarten, thus justifying their adoption of traditional literacy methods and the inclusion in their curriculum of the systematic teaching of letters with the use of relevant work sheets. For a significant number of kindergarten teachers the parents' pressure and the lack of meaningful training on the principles and the teaching practices that are recommended by the current teaching manual coupled by the plethora of recently published books with such exercises seems to explain the adoption of traditional practices and the limitation of literacy teaching using phonological awareness activities and the teaching of letters (Kondyli & Stellakis, 2006).

On the other hand, during meetings with parents we were asked many questions regarding the subject of teaching letters at kindergarten and we concluded that there is a significant divergence in the parents' expectations from kindergarten, which do not necessarily reflect what kindergarten teachers seem to consider the parents' expectations. Our conclusion is justified by a recent study carried out by Gliou (2009) where after being asked a relevant question, parents considered language games and reading-narration of books more effective than the learning of letters and words. We should bear in mind that the parents' beliefs on literacy are not associated with the literacy practices in the family environment (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson & Shapiro, 2006) or the later academic achievements of the children (Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Purcell – Gates, 1996), but appear to significantly influence the educational process per se as well as their cooperation with the kindergarten teaching staff. We thus considered it important to research both the expectations which parents have regarding literacy at kindergarten as well as how they see the literacy methods at kindergarten and primary school. This last distinction, if and wherever it exists, sheds more light on what parents believe of kindergarten.

Literacy definition

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.

Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society (UNESCO, 2005).

Emergent literacy skills include code-related skills (such as letter knowledge, print concepts, and early developing phonological awareness), as well as meaning-related strategies including vocabulary, grammatical ability, and oral narrative ability (Pullen & Justice, 2003; NICHD, 2005).

Methodology

Research took place in the spring of 2017. The subjects were fifteen mothers whose children were preschoolers and attended four state kindergartens at the city of Patras. The aforementioned parents responded to a letter by the researcher delivered via the kindergarten teachers. The letter outlined the aim of the research and the importance of the participants' contribution to the outcome of the training meeting that would focus on the subject of literacy at kindergarten.

From the fifteen mothers three had a basic education, three were university graduates and the rest were secondary education graduates. Eight of them were housewives, four worked for the public sector and three for the private sector. Eleven of them had two children, five of which were the younger ones attending kindergarten, while four had one child. The data of the sample are presented analytically in Table 1.

Table 1. Subjects of the research

Number	Education*	Occupation	Number of children in the family	First or second child
1	1	Private sector	2	2
2	2	Housewife	1	1
3	3	Private sector	2	2
4	2	Shop assistant	2	1
5	2	Public sector	1	1
6	2	Public sector	1	1
7	2	Housewife	2	2
8	2	Housewife	2	1
9	2	Housewife	2	2
10	3	Teacher	2	1
11	1	Housewife	1	1
12	1	Housewife	2	1
13	2	Private sector	2	1
14	3	Teacher	2	1
15	2	Housewife	2	2

*1 = primary education, 2 = secondary education, 3 = tertiary education

Source: own elaboration.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate information gathering tool. Although it was considered far more challenging a process than that of a questionnaire, it was chosen as we considered that we could not limit the parameters of the topic in question to closed-ended questions, which would invariably lead to one-word answers.

The interviews were carried out in the kindergarten teachers' room at a pre-arranged time by a Ph.D. student from the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education, University of Patras who had been trained on the interview procedure.

Each interview lasted 20'–30' and included the recording of demographic characteristics and thirty more questions concerning the literacy practices in the family environment, the parents' beliefs on the ways of learning reading and writing, the criteria they consider important for a successful literacy program at kindergarten and the transition to primary school. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and the transcript is the material that will be analyzed. This current research paper analyzes the parents' answers to the following questions:

- What are your expectations from kindergarten regarding your child's literacy? Which practices, in your opinion, can help your expectations be met?
- Do you believe that kindergarten and primary school differ? If yes, can you explain in what? Explain the similarities and differences between a kindergarten and primary school teacher.

The parents' responses were analyzed using the content analysis method (Weber, 1990). The premise was the basic unit of analysis. In other words, each and every

opinion expressed by the interviewees in the research was categorized into a particular category which emerged from the careful reading of the answers.

The most prominent answer to the first question was the teaching of letters. That is, parents considered that literacy by definition refers to the learning or not of letters and spelling. Their answers were categorized into the three following categories:

- 1.1. Alphabet letters should not be taught at kindergarten.
- 1.2. At kindergarten children should become familiar with the alphabet letters in a playful way.
- 1.3. At kindergarten children should learn the alphabet letters and systematically prepare for primary school.

The answers to the second questions fell into the following categories:

- 2.1. There is no difference between kindergarten and primary school.
- 2.2. There are no significant differences.

Findings

Two out of the fifteen mothers believe that alphabet letters should not be taught at kindergarten, nine believe that the children should familiarize with the letters, however, they pay emphasis on the procedure and not on the result while four mothers support that children should learn alphabet letters and spelling at kindergarten.

Table 2. Categorization of answers

Number	Question1	Question 2
1	3	2
2	3	2
3	2	2
4	1	1
5	2	2
6	2	2
7	2	2
8	2	2
9	2	2
10	1	2
11	2	1
12	3	2
13	3	2
14	2	2
15	2	2

Source: own elaboration.

The mothers falling into the first category justify their response paying emphasis on the aspect of socialization at kindergarten (number: 4) and the importance that should be

placed on oral language (number: 10). In particular, the first mother says: *“I didn’t expect my child to go to kindergarten and the teachers to be obliged to teach her to read”* she explains *“the role of kindergarten is kind of complex, I believe it’s important as it will have to guide children, however; above all, due to its educational role, it should encourage children, what I mean is not to set them on a single path and say typical, usual things but to encourage them throughout the lessons to think and react in a mature way.”*

The second mother believes that special emphasis should be paid to the cultivation of oral skills, *“to learn to express herself better; to allow her discourse to be structured, to help her analyze things more, to learn to love written discourse and want to investigate. Kindergarten should enable children to express themselves through games. For example, during Mother’s Day the kindergarten teacher asked the children to draw their experience and hide it in a small gift. This made me really happy. I didn’t want her to write things like “I love you mummy.”*

On the other hand, the four mothers supporting systematic teaching of the letters seem to believe that in such a way their children will do better at primary school. It is indicative that all three answers are connected with primary school. It thus seems that the parents consider kindergarten prepares children. They say: *“Let’s not exaggerate.*

We don’t want the children overworked, but they should learn the alphabet. Unless a child starts working seriously at kindergarten, learning the letters, she won’t be able to cope at primary school and have the teacher say this is A, this is B and my child having no clue...” (number: 1), *“not only should she have good foundations, she should also learn to write and tell the difference among the letters. I really push her at home and insist that she sit down and write”* (number: 2) *“She should at least learn the basics at kindergarten. To learn the letters and not start primary school without knowing the alphabet”* (number: 12), *“She should learn the letters at kindergarten because I’ve heard that nowadays primary school is totally different from when we went, when we started to learn the alphabet in year one. Things have become way more difficult. Children attend and have to be far more advanced and that’s what I require from kindergarten, to introduce the children to primary school. More work should be assigned at kindergarten. Yes, more work through games in the school playground or handicraft or drawing. To have time for all this, but when we talk about all-day-school, they can’t be playing six out of the eight hours, eating during the other hour and finally reading a fairy tale in the remaining time. I’d like kindergarten to teach them more systematically, more to essentially”* (number: 13).

Nevertheless, the majority of the mothers who participated in the survey seem to be for the familiarization of their children with letters, however, on the one hand they stress the cultivation of incentives and on the other the playful method of kindergarten. *“I believe in an elementary preparation, not too much, to force children to learn to put letters in the correct order. First, they need the stimulus that a process is starting, that she’s learning to write and read, it is a form of independence. That she would take a fairy tale and know what it’s about, I imagine children feel very proud that they can achieve such a thing and do not depend on mum or dad, I believe it increases their self-confidence and makes them feel more sure about themselves”* (number: 2).

“Kindergarten offers the stimuli to love the language, books; in primary school they’re going to learn it more essentially” (number: 5). *“At kindergarten the method is more playful”* (number: 6), *“I believe kindergarten shouldn’t lose this element, that it’s more about playing. I’d like it to bring them in touch with letters. I believe that it’s essential and absolutely right that they started to write their names on their drawings. Now she knows most of the letters and at present she’s trying to write words on her own, she can also read some. But that’s enough, it’s not necessary to push the children more”* (number: 8). *“Kindergarten should build a small foundation so that they can learn the letters, to help them adjust. I don’t think I want more than that”* (number: 15). Finally, a mother claimed that she had changed her mind. In particular: *“Before she started I was under the impression that they would start learning letters at kindergarten. Of course, I later realized, from the teacher (whose name is mentioned), who is a very talkative lady and helps you understand how things are, that that is not the role of kindergarten as is literacy, children do things and learn from the procedure”* (number: 11).

It is obvious that the small number of responses does not allow for individual categorizations or generalizations. However, we do consider indicative the fact that none of the three mothers with a university degree believed that their children should be taught letters in a conventional way at kindergarten. In fact, one of the mothers, who is a secondary school teacher and teaches a subject other than language, does not believe that the letters should be taught at kindergarten. On the contrary, two out of the four mothers who had an elementary education do believe that letters should be taught. This evidence is consistent with other findings (Umek, Podlesek & Fekonja, 2005; Gliou, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2000), which show that there is differentiation between the beliefs and practices of parents, which are associated with their social and educational background (education, income). The general tendency that has been recorded indicates that less educated parents tend to support traditional teaching methods and practices. (Lynch et al., 2006; Fitzgerald, Spiegel & Cunningham, 1991; Stipek, Milburn, Clements & Daniels, 1992).

The fact that all the participant mothers focused their answers on literacy at kindergarten and the teaching of letters shows that they adopt a bottom-up approach (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Ehri & McCormick, 1998; Evans, Fox, Cremaso & McKinnon, 2004), which is an approach based on letters and their learning. Although most mothers do not support systematic teaching, they seem to be unable to realize how practices like reading books, taking part in discussions, writing texts, the cultivation of positive incentives for reading and the cultivation of vocabulary are directly associated and boost their children’s literacy. In other words, they seem unable to link the learning of reading and writing with the more refined forms of discourse used in written texts (Halliday, 1996) and the use of decontextualized discourse (Snow, 1983) adopting an aspect that is limited to techniques that (de)code written symbols.

As for the second question, as expected, the vast majority of parents (13) believe that kindergarten and primary school significantly differ and the role of the teachers is different. Their answers focus on the different methods of teaching; the regularity of primary school, the different organization of the daily schedule and its predetermined syllabus. Regard-

ing the role of the teachers of both types of schools, their answers focus on the different expectations that, in their opinion, they have of teachers in both educational frameworks.

However, there are also two other answers both of which consider the educational frameworks in review not so different and claim that the role of both kindergarten and primary school teachers is similar. *“I imagine that especially the first two years of primary school do not differ from kindergarten, it’s just that primary school is a bit more demanding, because they have to write dictation, but I don’t think there is a difference. They do the same job in a different way and of course more assertively”* (number: 4). This particular mother says the following about kindergarten and primary school teachers: *“The kindergarten teacher creates more conditions for games, which is necessary due to the young age, but I do not believe either kindergarten or primary school teachers differ in their pedagogic roles.”* Moreover her opinion on cooperation between both kinds of teachers is of immense interest. In particular, she says: *“The primary school teacher should be informed about the child’s performance at kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher can inform the primary school teacher. In general, I don’t think they differ, they complement each other.”* The second mother (number: 11) who shares a similar opinion supports that: *“I believe primary school is just a continuation of kindergarten”*. As regards the role of the teachers in both frameworks she states: *“the only difference is that kindergarten teachers are closer to the child and parent. Primary school teachers are more formal (distant), more than they should be”*. In conclusion, both mothers consider the first year of primary school a continuation of kindergarten.

Of course, most mothers believe that there are considerable differences. The phrase that keeps reappearing is “systematic teaching”. *“When starting primary school, children find themselves in a different environment, no more games. Things get serious, we start from scratch”*. (number: 1) *“In primary school the method is static, the child sits in a desk and the educator shows him some things”* (number: 6). *“Of course things are different and I’ve already started telling my daughter that there will be studying from next year, it won’t be like this year. I know this from discussions I’ve had with other mothers. They find it rough for about three months, up to the Christmas holidays, because of this change”* (number: 8). *“The way the system is things get serious from the very beginning”* (number: 9). *“...at primary school there’s homework”* (number: 12). *“Kindergarten introduces, primary school has to teach children Greek language, writing, reading, all these”* (number: 13). *“Of course the system is different. It’s their books, the syllabus they have to cover. At primary everything is done drily. Whatever has to be done is done, to do an exercise, to write dictation, they won’t be done through games, through activities, firstly there’s no time for that”* (number: 14). *“Here (at kindergarten) there’s no problem if they write a letter wrong but there (primary school) they have to be correct. No more games or jokes, primary school is for learning, end of story”* (number: 15).

As for the different roles of educators the mothers seem to be aware of the various difficulties and stress that first year primary teachers face. *“I believe it’s a really tough job for the teacher of year one”* (number: 12). *“I can’t really be in the teacher’s shoes as I’ve heard lots of problems they encounter. For example, lack of time, or now that classes have*

too many pupils and despite their willingness, they don't have enough time" (number: 14). As for teaching methods they claim: *"The kindergarten teacher is softer, at primary school the teacher has to be tougher"* (number: 2), *"The kindergarten teacher has a creative job, they have the opportunity to deal with a child's creativity. A primary school teacher though is forced to cover the syllabus"* (number: 3), *"Kindergarten and primary school teachers have different expectations and demands. Each of them does their job"* (number: 9), *"They do their job in a different way. The primary school teacher has a particular amount of syllabus to cover so she becomes more formal and strict, while a kindergarten teacher has flexibility in her time and keeps pace both with a child that is progressing slowly and another one that is moving on faster"* (number: 8).

In conclusion, the vast majority of the mothers that participated in the survey see noticeable differences between the two educational frameworks under research. They believe that during the first year of primary school children learn with systematic teaching the skills of (de)coding. It can be ascertained from their answers that they believe the main job of teaching language in year one of primary school is the learning of letters, spelling and correct dictation. As for their opinions on literacy in year one it is obvious that they adopt the independent learning method (Street, 1984; Aidinis & Kostouli, 2001).

Despite the fact that in year one *"one of the most significant aims... is the systematic and conscious use of the alphabetic system of our language"* (Karantzola, Kyrdis, Spanelli & Tsiagani, 2006, p. 9) the official approach which is, at least officially, recommended is not limited to the formal teaching of the alphabetic system, but is based on a combined model, in which are melded "elements of the analytic-synthetic method, *"with elements of the emerging writing as well as a holistic approach to language"* (Karantzola et al., 2006, p. 12). The authors of the books clearly state their opinion that reading and writing are not the same as the mechanisms of (de)coding but apply to the drawing of meaning in the framework of an occasion of communication (Karantzola et al., 2006). Despite the concrete theoretical foundations included in the "teacher's book" of year one, it seems that the teaching manuals do not correspond to the principles of the teaching theory (Demetriadou & Konsouli, 2009) and thus has consequences on the practical side of teaching.

Bearing in mind that four of the participant mothers had children who had recently attended year one and because of the transition to primary school all the parents are concerned about what would happen to their children. It can be concluded that the opinions that were aired are not only a result of a more general perception about literacy but are also based on what they have heard from other parents, educators or even from their own experience about the practices followed in year one of primary school.

Discussion

If we accept that parents are a child's "first teachers" (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2007) and that literacy practices that take place in the family environment during the pre-school age affect subsequent school performance, the study of the expectations and beliefs of parents

concerning literacy is of prime importance not only because it defines their own role/facilitation at home (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996) but also because they are together after the child starts attending kindergarten and school practices (Purcell-Gates, 1996).

Although the sample of the research is limited and does not allow for generalizations, we believe that it reflects Greek reality and outlays the opinions of parents of children that completing kindergarten are about to start attending primary school.

According to the findings the majority of the parents supports that at kindergarten the child will come into contact with writing and reading through some activities but the teaching of letters and the mechanism of reading and writing will be attained systematically at year one of primary school.

From what has been said up to now the main issue regards the need of essential briefing and informing of parents as well as the strengthening of parent teacher cooperation. According to the New Kindergarten Syllabus (2011, p. 53) the educator “briefs-informs parents with issues related to teaching methods and practices” and has to involve them “systematically in the observation and assessment of their children’s development”. These relatively new developments in the Greek reality would remain unworkable or ineffective unless educators look into the perceptions of the parents they would be dealing with in teacher-parent conferences and in the educational process per se. Only if the educator has essential training on the theoretical principles of literacy and the educational practices which they are to apply will they be able to organize and apply a program of family literacy that will take into account any peculiarities and aim at enriching the literacy practices at home. As Lynch et al. (2006, p. 14) point out “because parents’ opinions are related to their behavior, any recommendation made to change the way they interact with their children should be made with respect towards their beliefs on literacy. If this doesn’t happen, then the educators may not be able to achieve the changes they want to implement.”

Bearing in mind the significantly limited amount of research on family literacy in our country it is paramount that this topic be researched more and as much as possible. Research should also cover the practices of literacy in the home environment in conjunction with the socio-educational background of each family.

Moreover, the carrying out of research on a biggest sample about family literacy including comparisons among various socio-economic groups would be interesting. Also, it would be of scientific interest the investigation of what parents believe as far as the practices of literacy in the home environment is concerned and why they should be applied. Finally, we hope that this research will open a discussion about the need for conducting an investigation concerning good practices of literacy that will involve teachers.

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POGLĄDY MATEK DZIECI W WIEKU PRZEDSZKOLNYM DOTYCZĄCE NAUCZANIA JĘZYKA I CZYTANIA W PRZEDSZKOLU I W PIERWSZEJ KLASIE W SZKOLE PODSTAWOWEJ

Abstrakt

W prezentowanym artykule przedstawiono wyniki ankiety dotyczącej poglądów rodziców dzieci we wczesnej edukacji na temat roli, jaką ich zdaniem, przedszkole odgrywa w nauczaniu czytania u ich dzieci oraz możliwych różnic w praktykach nauczania między przedszkolem a szkołą podstawową.

Dane zostały zebrane na podstawie częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z 15 matkami. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone w Patras wiosną 2017 r., dane przeanalizowano metodą analizy treści, a wyniki pokazują różnorodne poglądy na temat oczekiwań rodziców w stosunku do metod nauczania czytania w przedszkolu, wśród których to dominuje przekonanie, że dzieci powinny być uczone mechaniki czytania tekstów pisanych w przedszkolu poprzez gry i bez kładzenia nacisku na wynik uczenia się. Z drugiej strony wydaje się, że uczestnicy zaakceptowali nacisk na systematyczne nauczanie w pierwszym roku szkoły podstawowej.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie czytania, poglądy rodziców, metody nauczania czytania, przedszkole, pierwszy rok szkoły podstawowej