Public and Private Kindergarten from the perspectives of teachers in Greece: the case of Crete

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Abstract

The study about public and private education in Greece has not collected the interest of researchers to the extent that it should be. The present study has examined Greek teachers’ beliefs on: a) the differences between public and private kindergarten, b) the reasons which motivate parents to enroll their children in private kindergartens, c) the social status, that both of the types of kindergartens have. The results of the study indicate that Greek teachers consider that the main difference between these types of kindergartens are the better facilities that private kindergartens offer (transport by school bus, food provision at school, better and more equipped buildings) than the public kindergarten. These facilities are the reasons of parents preference of the private kindergartens. On the other hand teachers take into consideration the social status between public and private kindergartens. The teachers’ beliefs did not vary according to their educational or social background.

Keywords: public kindergarten, private kindergarten, kindergarten status, preschool education, kindergarten teachers’ beliefs.

Introduction

Public and private are two parallel types of education in Europe (Eurydice, 2012), where as private educational institutions are those that have their own financial resources and those that receive state aid (Eurydice, 2012). The largest proportion of the student population in preschool and compulsory education in Europe (86.5%) attend public schools and a small percentage (13.5%) attend private schools. The percentage of private education presents several variations from country to country. In Malta, France, Spain and especially in Belgium and the Netherlands, where there are private schools subsidized by the state, the percentage of private schools is close to 65%. Regarding Greece, according to European statistics, in 2009 only 6.1% of children of kindergarten and elementary school attended private schools (Eurydice, 2012). It is worth noting that in our country the private education is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education as far as the educational process and issues of teaching staff, but not financed by the state. Private schools operate on the grades of kindergarten, elementary and secondary education (high school and lyceum). In this paper we focus on the comparative approach of public and private kindergartens.

Private and public kindergarten in Greece

In the long history of the institution of early childhood education as throughout Europe, so in Greece the first institutions that operated in this area of education were private. As for our country, after the creation of the modern Greek state, the care and education of preschool children were the aim of private institutions which were either
owned by individuals (Greeks and foreigners, e.g. Hildner, Hill) or charitable associations (e.g. Educational Company), either funded by local municipalities (e.g. Municipality of Piraeus, Municipality of Ermoupolis) and operated with a variety of names (nipsioscholeia, kindergarten schools, nursery schools) (Kitsaras, 2001’ Chatzistefanidou, 2008 ′ Kyprianos, 2007). The Greek State demonstrates for the first time its interest in early childhood education with the Law BTMΘ/1895 and with the first Greek kindergarten curriculum in 1896, but the establishment and operation of public kindergarten will appear slowly. Only after the liberation of Macedonia and the population exchange of 1923, Greek state begins to establish public kindergartens with the main aim to address the problem of Greek children who did not speak well the Greek language (Kitsaras, 2001′ Kyprianos, 2007). Integration of kindergartens in public education and their subordination to the Ministry of Education is achieved by implementation of Law 4397 "On elementary education" in 1929, and the rate of establishment public kindergartens varies since then and until today (Kitsaras, 2001′ Kyprianos, 2007).

In the same time, private kindergartens follow their course throughout time with changes in their number, which are mainly due to changes in social and economic conditions of the country (Kitsaras, 2001). The private kindergartens in Greece provide education to a small number of children aged 4-6 years (Kitsaras, 2001′ Ministry of Education, 2009’ ELL. STAT., 2013). Significant increase in the number of children enrolled in private kindergartens occurred during the school years 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10 (Lakasas, 2012′ Ministry of Education, 2009), because from 2006 according to Law 3518 (FEK 272, A/21-12-2006) preschool education was established as obligatory and public kindergartens did not have the needed vacancies and building comforts to enroll all children from ages 4 – 6 years old. Since the 2009-2010 school year, however, began a continuous decline in the number of enrollments in private kindergartens, as a consequence of the economic crisis (Lakasas, 2012’ Papamathaiou, 2010’ Pouliopoulos, 2012). Private kindergartens are either autonomous institutions either part of broader private school clusters or segments of private nursery schools. Private kindergartens are a group of quite different: from those targeted at parents with high income and mainly active in wealthy areas of large urban centers with high tuition fees, to those targeted at middle-income working parents covering needs arising from everyday family and working life with lower tuition fees (Lakasas, 2012’ Papamathaiou, 2010).

We found no Greek studies regarding the relationship of private and public kindergartens and particularly how teachers face private education. This paper is a first attempt to research this relationship.

The purpose of this paper is to search the views of teachers employed in public education for those to private kindergarten. We want to find out their beliefs about the social status assigned by the Greek society to the private and the public kindergarten (Giddens, 1998). This paper presents data from a small part of a broader survey of our research pertinent to the research about the social status of the kindergarten as an educational institution and of the kindergarten teacher as a professional.

**Research Methodology**

We are going to take into consideration data from a survey with 343 participants teachers (123 kindergarten teachers, 110 elementary school teachers and 110 secondary education teachers serving public schools of Crete during the 2011-2012 school year. As a research tool was a questionnaire using enclosed Likert scale, which was constructed by the researchers, tested during a pilot study and then
administered to the participants teachers. Participants were asked to answer questions by choosing one of the statements of the five-point scale 0= Strongly disagree, 1= Disagree, 2= Not sure, 3= Agree, 4= Strongly agree. Answers correlated with participants educational and socio-demographic characteristics: educational grade they serve (kindergarten teachers, elementary school teachers, secondary education teachers), age, type of basic/initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree, further education and training beyond initial education, years of service, service in urban, suburban and rural areas, social origin criteria with the urbanity of the area in which they upbringing, and educational level of their parents. Research data were coded and analyzed using the statistical package SPSS (Nova-Kaltsouni, 2006). Cronbach a coefficient for the total questionnaire was estimated at 0.82, which is considered very satisfactory.

Results of the survey
The analysis of the research data gave the following results. On the position that private kindergartens have greater social status than the public kindergartens, participants teachers in our survey have no unambiguous view, though they tend to disagree with this position (M= 1,86 SD= 1,10). Statistically significant differences were found between kindergarten teachers who have any kind of education beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree (M 1,69 SD= 1,08) and those without further education beyond the initial (M= 2,55 SD= 0,90), and t= 4,18 (93,6) p <0.05, with the first to tend to believe that private kindergartens have no more social status than the public, and the latter tend to believe the opposite, that private kindergartens have greater social status from the public. Similar results were obtained by comparing primary education teachers (kindergarten and elementary school teachers) who have any kind of education beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree (M 1,67 SD = 1,08) and those without further education beyond the initial (M 2,13 SD= 1,07), and t= 3,06 (198,9) p <0.05, with the former tend to believe that private kindergartens have no more social status than the public and the latter have no clear position. The other educational and socio-demographic characteristics of the teachers in this sample do not significantly affect their views on this issue. The points which differentiate private from public kindergartens according to participants in the survey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Points of differentiation between private and public kindergartens. Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of the total participants teachers, and statistically significant differences between groups of participants teachers from the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private kindergartens differ from the public that:</th>
<th>M of the total survey</th>
<th>SD of the total survey</th>
<th>Statistically significant differences between the M groups of teachers from the survey</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>provide portability of children</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>K&gt;E*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very often have the capability to accommodate all parents’ needs, in contrast with public kindergartens.</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>K&gt;E*, K&gt;S*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>provide more social services (selective/helpful time etc.)</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>K&gt;E*, K&gt;S*</td>
</tr>
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As we see above, in Table 1, teachers agree that the points which outweigh the private versus public kindergartens concern mainly social benefits to children and families (enroll all children, undertake children’s transportation to and from school, offer lunch and flexible service hours). Participants in the survey tend to agree about the superiority of private kindergartens in terms of their building comforts, and disagree with the view that better teachers are employed in private kindergartens. Participants do not have a clear view but tend to disagree with the view that the child's attendance at a private kindergarten enhances the social prestige of his family. Although the views of teachers from the total sample converge, by using unvaried analysis of variance (Oneway ANOVA), we found differences depending on the grade at which they serve (kindergarten teachers, elementary school teachers, secondary school teachers). Thus, we applied multiple comparisons with Bonferroni statistical test to find out the pairwise differences in points of differentiation between private and public kindergartens among the three educational grades teachers participants in our survey. The results of these analyzes show statistically significant differences between kindergarten teachers and teachers who work in the other two grades of our educational system, as shown in the fourth column of Table 1. For all points of differentiation between private and public kindergartens, kindergarten teacher agree significantly more for the superiority of private, except from the point of employment best faculty in private kindergartens for which they strongly disagree, statistically more than the other two groups of teachers in the sample. The other educational and socio-demographic characteristics of the participants in the survey do not significantly affect their views on this issue.

As shown by their responses to a question, teachers both believe that the reported in Table 1 points of differentiation have different importance and constitute the reasons due to which parents send their children to private kindergartens. We also identified the same significant differences between kindergarten teachers, elementary school teachers and secondary school teachers presented in Table 1. Yet it seems that primary education teachers (kindergarten and elementary school teachers) who have not any kind of education beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree, consider that providing transportation and feeding of children from private kindergartens are most important reasons for choosing private kindergarten by parents than their colleagues, who have additional education beyond their initial education, thought. Also, kindergarten teachers without additional studies beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree, consider the best building comforts of the private kindergartens as the most important reason for choosing private kindergarten by parents (M 2,93 SD= 0,85), than their colleagues, who have additional education beyond their initial education, thought (M 2,55 SD= 0,91), and t =2,17 (113,0) for p<0.05. The other educational and socio-demographic characteristics of the participants in this survey do not significantly affect their views.
Kindergarten teachers have not unambiguous opinion on whether parents value most private or public kindergartens (M 2.09 SD= 0.91), while elementary school and secondary school teachers themselves do not appreciate more private than public kindergartens (M 1.04 SD= 0.98). Educational and socio-demographic characteristics of the participants in this survey do not significantly affect their views on this issue.

Discussion - Conclusions – Suggestions

The results obtained on the social status enjoyed by private kindergartens according the view of teachers show that public teachers employed in public schools have a common view, without differences between them as to the grade they serve (kindergarten, elementary school, high school), giving the image of a single body with its main feature the employment in public education. The result that the participants teachers in our survey do not take a clear view about the superior social status of private versus public kindergarten (or vice versa), may be interpreted due to the fact that they do not want to devalue the public school (in which they are employees). On the other hand may be interpreted by the fact that the differences between private kindergartens are so sufficiently large and diverse (e.g. eponymous private kindergarten school in North Athens and private kindergarten in the province) (Lakasas, 2012; Papamathaiou, 2010), so that ultimately for private kindergartens do not have a single picture and estimate. Knowing also the reasons due to which parents send their children to private kindergartens, as shown by the results, it shows that teachers understand that parents choose private kindergartens because they meet everyday social and functional family needs and not because parents consider private kindergartens better than public kindergartens. Maybe all of the above interpret the results of a relevant research in Cyprus, where kindergarten teachers from public and private kindergartens did not differ about the social status and recognition that they felt they have in society (Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2005).

Very significant is the finding that teachers who do not have further training and education beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree, tend to believe that the private kindergarten have higher social status than the public kindergarten unlike their colleagues who have further education and retraining. This finding shows that the confidence of teachers for the work they offer themselves is mainly associated with “larger” and higher studies, and this is reflected on their view about the social status acquired by the institution in which they serve.

Very interesting are the findings about the points of differentiation between private and public kindergarten. According to the teachers these points are associated with features that meet the social and functional needs of a family, such as transportation of children to and from school, providing food to children, flexible service hours that consist special assistance to working parents, who are not served by the service hours of all-day and of the classic public kindergarten. Of course, we must emphasize that both for transportation and for feeding their children, parents are indeed paying more money to private kindergarten. It is also significant that a very important reason of superiority of private versus public kindergarten is the possibility of the first to register/enroll all children addressed to it (for obvious commercial-economic reasons) something that can not be done in public kindergarten (Lakasas, 2012), which due to limited building comforts precede the enrollment of children aged from 5 to 6 years, and (only if there are enough vacancies left) children aged from 4 to 5 years. Teachers feel that the best building comforts tend to be one of the elements of positive differentiation of private kindergartens. This finding together
with those indicating that teachers do not believe that the private preschool employ better kindergarten teachers, nor the child's attendance on private kindergarten upgrades the social status of his family, suggest that teachers believe that the differentiation of the private kindergarten is not associated either with the quality of educational work (better teachers) or the pursuit of parental social status (child's attendance at a private kindergarten), but is related to the private kindergarten’s capability to undertake (for an additional fee) social needs of the family and to register/enroll the child in the kindergarten. We believe that this view is close to reality, as shown by the survey carried out. Sometimes cognitive abilities of private kindergartens’ graduates (Xu & Gulosino, 2006) outweigh those of public kindergartens’, in other cases there are no differences, while often cognitive abilities of public kindergartens’ graduates outweigh those of private kindergartens’ graduates (Carbonaro, 2006). This indicates that the educational process ranks high in public kindergartens, although they have more diverse (national, social, linguistic, cultural) groups of children, which is a characteristic that brings more difficulties in their education process (Carbonaro, 2006, Xu & Gulosino, 2006, Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2005). Regarding to similar results, concerning the reasons for choosing private kindergarten by parents, teachers believe that parents are "forced" to choose the option of private kindergarten both because of the possibility of enrollment and because of the fact that other social benefits are not provided by the public kindergarten. Teachers also believe that parents’ criteria for choosing a private kindergarten do not depend on the pedagogical process provided, but on the kindergarten’s capability to serve their family life.

Among all the participants teachers in our survey, the kindergarten teachers emphasize, more than elementary and high school teachers, on how important are the elements of social benefits for parents, better building comforts and the sense of social upgrading of the family from the child's attendance at a private kindergarten. It seems that the daily contact of kindergarten teachers with parents and the related difficulties they face, the better knowledge that they have about these issues, the daily deal with related problems (e.g. children who arrive at or depart late from kindergarten because of their parents’ working hours, frequently harassed by their parents to get their child before the end of school hours in the day-long segments, children who come from home without breakfast or lunch at the all-day kindergarten, etc.), the difficult position in which placing themselves when they can not enroll all children in kindergarten they serve, lead kindergarten teachers to understand how important these points are for both the social status of the institution and for the parents’ selection. In the same way we interpret the differences between the views of kindergarten teachers and those of teachers’ from other grades, about the importance of building structures (building rooms, room layout, teaching materials) in order to upgrade the social status of kindergarten and to be chosen by the parents: Preschool teachers daily experience many problems related to unsatisfactory building comforts of many public kindergartens (Koulaidis, 2006), they know how important this is for pedagogical and educational process in kindergarten (Dafermou et al., 2006, Linardakis & Oikonomidis, 2011), as opposed to elementary and secondary education, where although space and teaching materials are very important factors of education, they do not have a central role such as in preschool education. Probably, due to these specific knowledge and daily experience kindergarten teachers agree more than other grades teachers that the child's attendance at a private kindergarten enhances the prestige of his family.
Kindergarten teachers, in comparison with elementary and high school teachers support more strongly that teachers in private kindergartens are no better than themselves. This finding may be interpreted both as a kindergarten teachers’ need to defend their own work and, also, as a view arising from the knowledge of educational characteristics of their colleagues in private kindergartens: all kindergarten teachers are graduates of the same university-level studies, while kindergarten teachers employed in public kindergartens were previously able for in-service education in University Teachers’ Inservice Education Departments (KANEPI/GSEE, 2009). Research shows that teachers employed in public kindergartens have higher levels of education than their colleagues in private kindergartens (Xu & Gulosino, 2006; Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2005).

The finding that kindergarten and elementary teachers without further training and education beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree believe that social benefits and better building comforts provided by private kindergartens are elements that upgrade private kindergartens’ social status and influence parents’ choice, maybe indicates that more qualified teachers consider that the quality of the educational process, in which their training is important, should affect the social status of educational institutions and parents’ choice and not other factors.

Finally, the finding that elementary and high school teachers do not appreciate the private kindergarten more than the public kindergarten, can be interpreted on the one hand as a part of what is discussed above, and on the other hand as a step defending the public education system in which they serve.

Kindergarten teachers avoid taking an unambiguous view about how parents appreciate private compared to public kindergartens. This finding is interpreted by those outlined above, regarding what private kindergarten offers to children and to their parents, compared to public kindergarten. We believe that the kindergarten teachers’ view is quite modest and is shaped by daily communication with parents, an element that gives features of objectivity.

The most important conclusions of our research are the following:
- The participants teachers in our survey tend to assume that private kindergartens have no more social status than the public and they do not appreciate them more, supporting in this way the public school system in which they are employees.
- Teachers and specially kindergarten teachers, consider that strong points of differentiation between private and public kindergartens, and reasons for choosing private over public kindergarten by parents, are the social benefits (enrollment, transportation, feeding all children) and building comforts rather than the quality of teachers who work in kindergartens. Therefore, private kindergartens are more responsive to the needs of families of preschool children than the public kindergartens.
- The more education beyond their initial education for teacher’s bachelor degree teachers have, the less appreciation for the private kindergarten they feel. This, possibly, indicates the confidence teachers feel for their proficiency and therefore the work done in the public schools.

The findings and conclusions of our research have constraints and lead to the suggestions listed below:
- The participants teachers in our survey come from one single geographic region of Greece, from one administrative and educational region, the island of Crete, with few private kindergartens located in the urban centers of the island, aimed at families with average budget. The expansion of the research to teachers serving in the rest of the
country would give a more representative picture of the public school teachers’ views for the issue in question.
- Exploring the issue with another research tool (e.g. interview) will allow a fuller search of the issue.
- It is also advisable to search the views of private kindergarten teachers, so as to have a more integrated approach of comparing public and private kindergarten.
- It is very important to search the views of parents who chose either the public or the private kindergarten for their children, in order to find out how the wider Greek society (apart from the teaching profession) faces the two institutions.

In terms of educational policy, research findings lead to the following suggestions:

a) Establishment of new kindergartens and operation of new sections with the necessary employment of teachers, so as to increase the number of vacancies provided, and may include all preschool children in public kindergartens. It is obvious that in these difficult economic times prevailing in Greece, the implementation of this proposal seems utopian and unworkable. But, precisely, this economic situation requires, at a time when families are aware unprecedented deprivation, that the state must give all the children the potentiality to attend the public kindergarten free of tuition fees, providing educational structures. In this way the state will respond both to the constitutional obligation ("Education is core mission of the State" Constitution of Greece (2001), Art.16, 2) and will exempt families from additional financial burdens on the education of their children. Besides, investing in education is the best foundation for the course of a society towards development (Heckman, 2006 Klimitsaras, 2001).

b) Generalization of all-day kindergarten. It is obvious that the type of classic kindergarten with the service hours from 8:00 to 12:30, no longer serves the needs of working parents. The child's attendance in extended school hours (from 7:00 to 16:00) with the possibility of resting time and meal (which children bring from home) serves their families’ needs (Eurydice, 2009) and provides better education to the children (McClelland, et al., 2006 Gorey, 2001 Blok et al., 2005 Carbonaro, 2006 Doliopoulou, 2003).

c) The improvement of the building comforts of kindergartens’ is 'sine qua non' condition for offering quality education in early childhood and is one of the most urgent needs in Greece (Koulaidis, 2006 Oikonomidis, 2010).

The research about social status and differences between the private and the public kindergarten presented in this paper, essentially highlights the need to improve the supply of public preschool education.

References


