

Investigation of perceptions and practices of kindergarten and first grade primary school teachers concerning their cooperation for the enhancement of literacy

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ABSTRACT

The present work concerns the investigation of the perceptions of kindergarten and first grade primary school teachers of their cooperation in terms of enhancing the literacy of their students. The data were collected by administering an electronic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to teachers of Greek public schools in the prefectures of Achaia and Ilia. The main findings of this study indicate that in contrast to the existing reality, first grade primary school teachers as well as kindergarten teachers recognize the need to develop cooperation between them, recognizing that this will contribute to the smoother transition of students from kindergarten to primary school. They also seemed to want to create a balanced language curriculum that would ensure continuity in implemented teaching literacy practices between the two specific types of schools. Furthermore, the first grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers who participated in the research want to implement a common training framework on issues of modern teaching in order to facilitate the cooperation between them, which according to the teachers is hindered by the factors of co-location of school units and lack of time due to pressure experienced by teachers to cover the "course material" according to the modern curriculum of the language course.

KEYWORDS

Literacy, kindergarten, primary school, teachers' perceptions and practices, co-operation, transition

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent travail concerne l'étude de la perception des enseignants des écoles maternelles et primaires, ainsi que de leur coopération en matière d'amélioration de l'alphabétisation de leurs élèves. Les données ont été collectées en remettant un questionnaire électronique et des entretiens semi-directifs aux enseignants des écoles publiques grecques des préfectures d'Achaïe et de l'Élide. Les principaux résultats de cette enquête indiquent qu'en contraste avec à la réalité

actuelle, les enseignants de première année de l'école primaire, ainsi que les enseignants de la maternelle, reconnaissent la nécessité de développer une coopération étroite, constatant que cela contribuera à une transition plus douce des élèves de la maternelle à l'école primaire. Ils sembleraient également vouloir créer un programme d'enseignement linguistique équilibré, qui assurerait la continuité pédagogique des pratiques d'alphabétisation mises en œuvre entre ces deux types d'écoles bien spécifiques. De plus, les enseignants de première année du primaire et de maternelle qui ont participé à cette étude, souhaitent mettre en place un cadre de formation commun sur les questions d'un enseignement moderne. Ce dernier facilitera leur coopération, qui, selon eux est entravée par des facteurs de co-implantation des unités scolaires et par manque de temps en raison de la pression ressentie par ces mêmes enseignants pour couvrir le "matériel didactique" conformément à l'actuel programme des cours de langue.

MOTS-CLÉS

Alphabétisation, maternelle, école primaire, perceptions et pratiques des enseignants, coopération, transition

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the perceptions and practices of kindergarten and first grade primary school teachers serving in public Greek schools with respect to their cooperation to enhance their students' literacy. An exploration of the educational reality reveals a lack of collaboration between first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo Meier, & Frank, 2016, 2017; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Early, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Hjelte, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In particular, studies conducted in Greece confirm this fact and focus on the general perceptions of early school years teachers concerning cooperation (Sivropoulou & Vrinioti, 2009; Vrinioti, 2010). However, these studies do not deal with the study of the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers regarding their cooperation on literacy. This research gap is being explored by the present research work.

The paper begins with the theoretical framework, there follow the methodology, and next, the research findings are presented and analyzed. The study closes with the section containing the discussion and conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on school effectiveness indicate that school literacy practices are related to three factors: *'the school'*, *'the teacher'* (as the most important one) and the *'teaching approaches /material'* (see: Djonov, Torr, & Stenglin, 2018; Girolametto et al., 2000; Hall & Harding, 2003; IRA, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2009; Xue & Meisels, 2004). Also, the research findings show that student performance is affected by the individual and family characteristics of students, by the teachers and the characteristics of the schools they attend, as well as by the implemented educational systems (OECD, 2004, 2010).

Providing all citizens with the necessary reading skills is emerging as one of the most important goals of educational systems in recent decades in Europe (EACEA, 2011). In fact, according to UNESCO, *"The educator is at the heart of empowering approaches to literacy,*

fostering a dialogue based on the learners' concerns and turning the resulting conversation into literacy learning. The flexibility and sensitivity of the educator as well as their capacity to adapt learning strategies to the dynamic of the moment are central to achieving both literacy and empowerment” (2017, p. 58).

The research community is concerned not only with what teachers do, but also with what they know and what they believe about educational practice regarding first literacy. Research on kindergarten and primary school teachers has shown the relationship between their knowledge and perceptions and the teaching approach they adopt for the effectiveness of literacy enhancement (Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Kennedy et al., 2012; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010; Ottley et al., 2015; Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012). Teachers, having an important role in teaching literacy, need to be well aware of the various aspects of literacy. Research conducted internationally (see: Hall & Harding, 2003; Hindman & Wasik, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2012; Ottley et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2008; Scull, Nolan, & Raban, 2013), but also in Greece (see: Papoulia-Tzelepi, 2001; Stellakis, 2012; Tafa, 2001) with early years primary school teachers regarding literacy practices revealed the tendency to adopt the balanced approach to literacy, (Pearson et al., 2007; Pressley, 2002, 2005). A balanced approach requires the teacher to combine theoretical methods and teaching techniques, to be informed, to go through training and to collaborate, in order to become more effective for his students (Pearson et al., 2007; Pressley, 2002).

An important aspect of the effectiveness of educational work for students is their smooth transition from one level to another (Ahtola et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Margetts, 2002; Niesel, & Griebel, 2007; Pianta et al., 1999; Pressley, 2002, 2005; Pearson et al. 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Transition can be greatly facilitated if educators from one area, for example kindergarten, work with those of the next level, that is, the primary school and vice versa (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Early, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Pianta et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In fact, collaboration between teachers of different levels is assessed as particularly important and can be implemented both by students visiting the next class, because this contributes to their adjustment, as well as by teachers' discussions about the peculiarities of the curricula of the language course and by kindergarten teachers sharing information about the special characteristics of students who are about to go to primary school (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Hjelte, 2005; Vrinioti, 2010).

In the context of the present research, the following research questions were asked:

- 1) What are the perceptions of kindergarten and first grade primary school teachers about the need to promote collaboration between them to enhance student literacy?
- 2) What are the perceptions of kindergarten and first grade primary school teachers in relation to the benefits and the ways to achieve cooperation to enhance student literacy?
- 3) What practices do kindergarten and first grade primary school teachers adopt to achieve cooperation which enhances student literacy?

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Research tools

The present research was conducted during the school year 2013-2014, using the research tools of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview. In particular, the research was carried out in

two stages. Data and the findings of the study still reflect the present educational reality as the curricula implemented still remain the same. In the first stage, the research data were collected using a questionnaire (SurveyMonkey), completed by kindergarten teachers and first grade primary school teachers, and in the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a portion of first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers who completed the questionnaire (Creswell, 2016).

In particular, the questionnaire, which was designed taking into account the relevant scientific research literature, included closed-ended questions asking first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers participating in the research to indicate: a) the degree of their agreement using a 5-point Likert scale (1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=enough, 4=a lot, 5=very much) with the necessity of cooperation, as well as with the existence of cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers to cultivate the literacy of their students b) their agreement or disagreement (options: yes / no) with three different ways of achieving cooperation with the teachers of the educational level that follows or precedes their own to enhance literacy, and c) the degree of their agreement by using a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree to 7=strongly disagree) regarding the benefits of cooperation between teachers of different levels (Field, 2009).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers who participated in the first phase, in order to make a more intensive and targeted study of their perceptions on all research questions. Indicative are the following questions that were raised for discussion with the teachers who participated in the research: *“Why do you consider cooperation beneficial and how can a constructive cooperation for all be achieved? Do you think it is important to do joint language activities to make it easier for students to move from one level to another? What do first-grade primary school teachers /kindergarten teachers usually ask of you? What do they want to know? Why do you think a collaboration to strengthen literacy is not thriving? Aren't you or your colleague seeking it?”*. The responses of the research subjects were recorded with their consent (Creswell, 2016).

Sample

The questionnaire was completed by 632 teachers, 326 kindergarten teachers and 306 first-grade primary school teachers who taught in the first grade of primary schools in the prefectures of Achaia and Ilia. More specifically, the questionnaire was sent through the two Directorates of Primary Education of the two prefectures to all teachers of the above two categories, the total number of which amounts to 837 people. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample of kindergarten teachers and teachers of the first grade of primary school.

Regarding the gender of first-grade primary school teachers, 243 (79.4%) are women and 63 (20.6%) are men, while 325 kindergarten teachers (99.7%) are women. 260 (85%) first-grade primary school teachers and 283 kindergarten teachers (88.3%) have basic university studies, while 38 (12.5%) first-grade primary school teachers and 30 (9.2%) kindergarten teachers have completed postgraduate studies. One hundred and thirty-two (43.1%) first-grade primary school teachers have worked from 0-10 years, 93 (30.4%) from 11-20 years, while 81 (26.5%) for more than 20 years. 165 (50.6%) kindergarten teachers have up to 10 years of teaching experience, 103 (31.8%) have 11-20 years and 58 (17.6%) have more than 20 years of experience. One hundred and eighty-one (59.2%) first-grade primary school teachers and 182 (55.8%) kindergarten teachers work in urban schools, 63 (20.6%) first-grade primary school teachers and 75 (21.2%) kindergarten teachers work in semi-urban areas and 62 (20.3%) first-grade primary school teachers and 69 (19.2%) kindergarten teachers work in rural areas. One hundred and forty-nine

(48.7%) primary schools are co-located with kindergartens, while 157 (51.3%) are not co-located. Respectively, as far as kindergarten teachers are concerned, 175 (53.7%) kindergartens are co-located with primary schools, while 151 (46.3%) are not co-located. Thirty-two educators from those who completed the questionnaire participated in the process of the semi-structured interviews; sixteen were first-grade primary school teachers (9 women and 7 men) and 16 female kindergarten teachers.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the teachers who participated in the research

	Gender		Education		Years of service			School area			Co-location	
	Males	Females	Bachelor	Master	0-10	11-20	>20	Urban	Semi-urban	Rural	Yes	No
First grade of primary school teachers (N=306)												
Frequency	63	243	260	38	132	93	81	181	63	62	149	157
Percentage	20.6%	79.4%	85%	12.5%	43.1%	30.4%	26.5%	59.2%	20.6%	20.3%	48.7%	51.3%
Kindergarten teachers (N=326)												
Frequency	1	325	283	30	165	103	58	182	75	69	175	151
Percentage	0.3%	99.7%	88.3%	9.2%	50.6%	31.8%	17.6%	59.6%	21.2%	19,2%	53.7%	46.3%

Data analysis

The analysis of the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire was done with the statistical program SPSS 25.0 (Field, 2009). For the independence control of two quality variables the control χ^2 was used; in each case the Cramer index was presented, which highlights the intensity of the relationship between the two quality variables. Cramer index values of at least 0.3 are considered satisfactory (Field, 2009).

The analysis of the recorded texts of the interviews was done by using the technique of content analysis (Creswell, 2016) taking as a unit of analysis the 'issue' (theme) (Koustourakis, 2014; Asimaki, Koustourakis, & Nikolakakos, 2020; Creswell, 2016). The resulting analysis units were included in some of the following analysis categories, which are consistent with the research questions:

- (1) Necessity for cooperation between kindergarten first-grade primary school teachers and teachers and depiction of the existing educational reality.
- (2) Benefits of cooperation and ways to achieve it.
- (3) Practices for the implementation of the cooperation between the kindergarten teachers and the teachers of the first grade of the Primary School.

RESULTS

The findings of this research will be presented in the various categories of research material analysis.

Necessity for cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers and depiction of the existing educational reality

In the first phase of the research, administering the questionnaire, the first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers were asked to answer the question ‘To what extent do you think that the teachers of the first grade of primary school should cooperate with the kindergarten teachers on language teaching?’. As shown in Table 2, kindergarten teachers support collaboration to a greater and statistically significant degree, compared to first-grade primary school teachers: $\chi^2(4)=16.485$, $p<0.05$, $fc=0.162$. Kindergarten teachers with the most years of experience (at least 21 years, 43.1%) were much more positive than kindergarten teachers with the fewest years of experience (≤ 10 years: 32.1% and 11-20 years: 34.0%) on the need of cooperation: $\chi^2(2)=16.189$, $p<0.05$, $fc=0.158$. First-grade primary school teachers working in a primary school co-located with a kindergarten (25.5%) seemed to agree more with the need to cooperate compared to their colleagues working in separate schools (16.6%): $\chi^2(4)=10.035$, $p<0.05$, $fc=0.181$.

TABLE 2
Perceptions of the need for cooperation

To what extent do you think that the teachers of the first grade of primary school should cooperate with the kindergarten teachers on language teaching?		
	Kindergarten teachers	First grade Primary school teachers
Not at all	5 (1.5%)	10 (3.3%)
A little	22 (6.7%)	26 (8.5%)
Enough	88 (27.0%)	90 (29.4%)
A lot	98 (30.1%)	116 (37.9%)
Very much	113 (34.7%)	64 (20.9%)

To the question ‘To what extent do you think that primary school teachers are cooperating with kindergarten teachers for language teaching’, as indicated by the study of the data in Table 3, kindergarten teachers question to a statistically significant degree in comparison with teachers the existence of such a collaboration: $\chi^2(4)=265.273$, $p<0.001$, $fc=0.648$. In other words, although kindergarten teachers recognize the benefits of working with primary school teachers to enhance literacy, they have found that this is not the case in the daily educational reality of their schools. However, while teachers have been more moderate in recognizing the need for collaboration with kindergarten teachers, they seem to believe that it exists to some extent in practice.

TABLE 3
Perceptions on the existence of cooperation

To what extent do you think that primary school teachers are cooperating with kindergarten teachers for language teaching		
	Kindergarten teachers	First grade Primary school teachers
Not at all	201 (61.7%)	13 (4.2%)
A little	101 (31.0%)	140 (45.8%)
Enough	18 (5.5%)	107 (35.0%)
A lot	5 (1.5%)	36 (11.8%)
Very much	1 (0.3%)	10 (3.3%)

Kindergarten teachers' responses vary considerably depending on whether their kindergarten is co-located with a primary school. In particular, the co-location factor led to a higher degree of kindergarten teachers in question (43%) compared to their other colleagues (31.8%) to declare that they cooperate with the teachers of the first grade of Primary School: $\chi^2(4)=10.151$, $p<0.001$, $fc=0.176$. The findings regarding first-grade primary school teachers are similar: $\chi^2(4)=10.947$, $p <0.005$, $fc=0.189$.

The analysis of the material of the semi-structured interviews shows that the kindergarten teachers evaluate as very important the need for cooperation with the teachers of the first grade of Primary School because they consider that it is for the benefit of learners. This is because the collaboration facilitates the learning process and balances the cognitive differences associated with the discontinuity of kindergarten and primary school curricula for the language module, thus contributing to the smooth transition of students to the first grade of primary school. They said characteristically:

“I think that collaboration is an extremely supportive process, especially for students, for us teachers, for parents, for the educational process in general” (Kindergarten teacher 4 - K. 4).

“Good and constructive cooperation can smooth out gaps and differences that make the transition to primary school difficult for children” (K. 8).

However, 10 of the kindergarten teachers who participated in the interview process (62.5%) stated that in the daily reality of their schools there is no cooperation with the teachers of the first grade to strengthen student literacy. The 6 kindergarten teachers (37.5%) who acknowledged the existence of collaboration with the first-grade primary school teachers pinpoint it at the level of the student transition program in the primary school without it focusing on literacy issues. The following excerpt from a kindergarten teacher interview is typical and revealing:

“First-grade primary school teachers are inaccessible. I have been working for 34 years in the same kindergarten that is co-located with a primary school and no teacher has ever asked me anything about language, about the learning process, about teaching, about the knowledge that our children acquire here. They almost always come at the end of the year, when they know who's going to be teaching first grade next year, or at the beginning of the next year, and they only ask me if a child has a learning disability. Faced with this attitude, the inaccessibility and complete indifference of teachers, I am not interested in further cooperation with them. On a personal level, I read the curricula of the kindergarten and the first grade and I try as much as I can to help my students not to experience the feeling of frustration and interruption of their effort during the transition process. I would like the framework to be different, to cooperate with the teachers. It would help us all and especially the children” (K. 12).

Of the total number of first-grade primary school teachers who participated in the interview process, 14 (87.5%) acknowledged the importance of working with kindergarten teachers to enhance student literacy. The statement of a teacher with 34 years of experience who spoke about the need to institutionalize cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers is characteristic:

“I am of the opinion that the cooperation of kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers on the subject of literacy, and not only, should be made much more specific and targeted and should in some way be institutionalized. In

this way the kindergarten teacher will become more effective and the teacher's job easier and therefore more efficient. The kindergarten teacher takes the little student by the hand and leads him to a point where the first-grade teacher will receive him” (Primary school teacher 4 - T. 4).

The above excerpt shows the need for kindergarten teachers to be informed about the work done in primary school in order to be able to support the teaching work of first-grade primary school teachers.

In the interviews, eight first-grade primary school teachers (50%) spoke about the existence of cooperation with kindergarten teachers in daily school life. It is an occasional collaboration, which has a spontaneous and not an organized character, which does not focus exclusively on the learning area of the language and the enhancement of natural literacy. The following interview excerpt is revealing:

“I work with the kindergarten teacher after I have met the children. What interests me most is the behavior, the character, the family environment, the tendency to adjust and if there is any indication of difficulty in learning. I will not ask specifically about the language course” (T. 9).

Benefits of cooperation and ways to achieve it

In the question ‘Identify the ways in which you believe that collaboration can be achieved between first grade of primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers to approach language teaching’ the first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers who participated in the research were asked to agree on the implementation of specific ways to achieve cooperation and these findings are shown in Table 4. The study of the data of this Table reveals that kindergarten teachers consider the organization of classroom space by teachers of both levels a more appropriate way of cooperation with teachers, in order to create the necessary teaching stimuli that will help enhance functional reading. First-grade primary school teachers also consider the analysis of individual child assessment files (portfolio) as the most important way to achieve cooperation with kindergarten teachers in order to be able to understand the knowledge level of each student.

TABLE 4
Ways to achieve collaboration between teachers

	Analysis of objectives and teaching practices for language teaching at each level	Delivery and analysis of individual assessment files (portfolio) by kindergarten teachers to first grade of primary school teachers	Organization of the classroom space in the light of a common vision to enhance functional reading
Kindergarten teachers			
Yes	198 (60.7%)	171 (52.5%)	224 (68.7%)
No	128 (39.3%)	155 (47.5%)	102 (31.3%)
First-grade primary school teachers			
Yes	174 (56.9%)	196 (64.1%)	139 (45.4%)
No	132 (43.1%)	110 (35.9%)	167 (54.6%)

The analysis of the research data of Table 4 indicates that first-grade primary school teachers, in comparison with the kindergarten teachers, showed a statistically more important acceptance of cooperation concerning "the delivery of the individual assessment files of the children (portfolio) to them": $\chi^2(1)=8.720$, $p<0.05$, $fc=0.117$. They also showed statistically significantly more negative attitudes towards the solution related to 'the organization of the classroom space by teachers of both levels in the light of a common vision to enhance functional reading': $\chi^2(1)=35.012$, $p <0.001$, $fc=0.235$.

Asked if '*collaboration between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers on literacy can be beneficial*', first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers involved in the survey were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree to 7=strongly disagree). Here the higher variable values indicate less importance. The analysis of the data revealed three main benefits of the collaboration that focus on the factors: 'student', 'curriculum' and 'teacher'. For kindergarten teachers, the most important factor was 'student' (Mean=2.76, Standard Deviation=1.20), followed by 'curriculum' (M=4.12, SD=1.19) and 'teacher' (M=4.63, SD=1.36). Respectively, the order of the findings in terms of importance regarding the first-grade primary school teachers was: 'student' (M=2.1, SD=1.23), 'curriculum' (M=4.34, SD=1.42) and 'teacher' (M=4.39, SD=1.06).

All kindergarten teachers who took part in the semi-structured interview believe that working with first-grade primary school teachers can be *particularly beneficial* in removing the discontinuity of the literacy support program from kindergarten to primary school. This is in order for the students to have stability and continuity of the procedures they are accustomed with, in order to smoothly adjust to the new requirements related to the curriculum of the language course of the Primary School and the special conditions that prevail in each school unit. The following statement of a kindergarten teacher on how to facilitate the work of the teachers of the first grade of Primary School is indicative of this:

"We need to inform them about language learning methodology, so that they have an idea of what to do next, how to work based on what we have already done and the children already know" (K. 7).

The effort of many kindergarten teachers to work with the first-grade primary school teachers who will receive the children during their transition to primary school is recognized and positively evaluated by some first-grade primary school teachers, as shown in the following excerpt from an interview:

"Kindergarten teachers want to inform us about children, their progress, development, the needs of some children, the gaps that need to be filled. Their role is very helpful when we work together" (T. 13).

In fact, the kindergarten teachers express the opinion that in order for students to better adjust to the Primary School and to promote their cooperation with the first-grade primary school teachers, it is necessary to adapt the curriculum of the specific school:

"In order to achieve a constructive cooperation, the curriculum of the primary school and the methodology of approaching the language course should change. Some goals and some activities should be common" (K. 15).

In addition, kindergarten teachers feel the need to be informed by first-grade primary school teachers:

“As a kindergarten teacher, I would like to know more about language teaching in the next class” (K. 11).

This is understood by some first-grade primary school teachers who, despite pointing out the different teaching approach in kindergarten, they also recognize the need for cooperation with kindergarten teachers to enhance students' literacy. In particular, the benefits of this collaboration are recognized by 9 first-grade primary school teachers (56.25%) of the sample who participated in the interview process:

“I consider cooperation important because primary school is a continuation of education in kindergarten. I believe that kindergarten teachers work mainly with the game and in a very spontaneous way. We are under pressure by the course material, the curriculum, the worksheets. Kindergarten teachers need to learn some things about the work we do in primary school so they can help us more” (T. 6).

“I consider collaboration imperative. Unfortunately, we do not cooperate and it is usually the first-grade primary school teachers' fault. Maybe the kindergarten teachers should come and inform us about the children and their development when they finish kindergarten, but we should definitely know about the children who are coming to primary school. This can happen at the beginning of the school year when the teacher knows that he/she will have the first grade” (T. 1).

Practices for the implementation of cooperation

The analysis of the findings from the open question of the questionnaire ‘*Identify practices of cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers to enhance literacy*’ indicated that important practices of cooperation for kindergarten teachers are: the implementation of joint actions, the constant interaction between educators, greater engagement of first-grade primary school teachers with the kindergarten and the work done to enhance the natural literacy of infants in it, and finally re-establishment of the cognitive goals in the two school levels by clearly defining the required level of language acquisition of students upon completion of kindergarten. Teachers, on the other hand, consider important practices of collaboration the following: joint actions, meetings to acquire information from kindergarten teachers about the performance of each student and a clear specification of the teaching objectives of kindergarten and primary school. Furthermore, kindergarten teachers consider the absence of co-location of their school with a primary school as a limiting factor in their effort to work with first-grade primary school teachers. From the teachers' point of view, the lack of time and the pressure they feel to cover the curriculum are considered as deterrents to the promotion of their cooperation with the kindergarten teachers.

The analysis of the material of the semi-structured interviews shows that 12 of the kindergarten teachers in the sample (75%) recognized the existence of an effort to implement cooperation with first-grade primary school teachers, while 4 kindergarten teachers (25%) spoke about the non-existence of such collaboration. In fact, kindergarten teachers, as shown in the following excerpts, believe that they are taking the initiative to work with first-grade primary school teachers and when cooperation is implemented it does not focus on enhancing literacy but has a broader orientation:

“First-grade primary school teachers are always informed about the cognitive and language skills of each student who will attend primary school due to our own initiative. It is usually we kindergarten teachers who approach them first and they typically ask us mainly about children's progress” (K. 14).

“Yes, there is a collaboration that takes place mainly for the purpose of the acquaintance of the children with the way first grade works and not so much for the implementation of common literacy activities. The first-grade primary school teachers even tell us that children often come to primary school with an excess of knowledge regarding language and literacy. This happens effortlessly, without the setting of common goals and course of action” (K. 7).

The analysis of the data of the interviews with the teachers shows that 13 first-grade primary school teachers (81.25%) spoke about the issue of cooperation between teachers and kindergarten teachers to strengthen the literacy of students, who also pointed out that said collaboration does not exist, either because of them (4 teachers, 25%) or because of kindergarten teachers (6 teachers, 37.5%). The following excerpt from an interview indicating the expected desired level of literacy of students moving on to Primary School is characteristic:

“There is no special cooperation with kindergarten teachers for the language course. When students come to primary school, they know some things about language, but they have not mastered all the required language skills. However, children could know all the letters recognize them and write them down, they could read at a satisfactory level, and even write some words” (T. 2).

Finally, 3 first-grade primary school teachers (18.75%) pointed out the need for an institutional intervention by the Ministry of Education with the introduction of a joint training of first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers regarding the language module, in order to enable cooperation between them:

“If it is not more institutionalized, it is difficult to have cooperation on the initiative of teachers. We need joint training and training to understand the specifics of each level and the need for cooperation between us” (T. 12).

Assessing the findings of the interviews, it appears that the answers of the first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers converge with the findings that emerged from the completion of the questionnaire used in this research.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the present work, an attempt was made to investigate the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers of Greek public schools in the prefectures of Achaia and Ilia of their cooperation and the practices they implement in order to strengthen the literacy of their students. The results of this study cannot be generalized to the whole country but are generalizable to the teacher population of the two prefectures where it took place, on account of the fact that 75.51% of the teachers of the two specific prefectures participated in the research.

The research findings highlight the convergence and divergence of views of Greek kindergarten and first-grade primary school teachers for the collaboration between them to promote literacy, which reflects their established practices:

- a) The teachers who participated in the research seemed to recognize the need for cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers for the enhancement of literacy in their lessons. In fact, kindergarten teachers seemed to be more positive concerning said collaboration. However, the educational reality reveals a reduced to non-existent

cooperation between teachers of different levels, which is due either to the reluctance mainly of first-grade primary school teachers, or to the lack of communication between educators due to the physical distance associated with the lack of school co-location. First-grade primary school teachers attribute the absence of cooperation with kindergarten teachers to their commitment to the curriculum of the language course in the Primary School which dictates covering a plethora of course material within very restricted time frames. Thus, first-grade primary school teachers believe that they do not have the necessary time for collaborative processes.

- b) Regarding the ways of achieving cooperation, there was a disposition for flexibility on the part of kindergarten teachers, who would accept the modification of their pedagogical practices and the adaptation of their school classroom space in favour of enhancing the literacy of their students. On the contrary, first-grade primary school teachers seem to perceive their cooperation with kindergarten teachers as a process restricted in their typical receiving of feedback and of the individual files of students' kindergarten work (portfolio), which reveal their learning progress. In fact, the first-grade primary school teachers who participated in the research recognize the benefits of a possible collaboration as long as it is focused on a student-centred teaching framework aimed at implementing practices to enhance students' natural literacy.
- c) As far as cooperation practices are concerned, the frustration of teachers, mainly kindergarten teachers, is reflected; they believe they are limited to formal meetings with first-grade primary school teachers to update them on the learning abilities of students who are moving on to Primary School, as well as visits with the students to the primary school at the end of the kindergarten school year.

Based on the findings of this research, we come to some important conclusions. In particular, based on the definition of language and literacy perceptions, that is, *"Teachers' beliefs about literacy can [thus] be understood as including what they assume, think, and know about how young children develop literacy skills; what they perceive a teacher's role in this process to be; and how they feel they should implement these practices in the classroom"* (Hindman & Wasik, 2011, p. 480) we find that their formation is directly related to time, context and occasion (socio-historical dimension). Although perceptions often serve as indicators of practice (Fives & Gill, 2015; Ottley et al., 2015; Yero, 2002), our research has shown a contradiction between them. While at the theoretical level of perceptions, the positive attitude of the research subjects for the promotion of cooperation between first-grade primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers on the issues of 'literacy' was reflected, which could be supported by creating an appropriate institutional framework for educational and collaborative actions, the educational reality is completely different. That is, at the level of educational practice, first-grade primary school teachers seem to either hesitate or consider themselves unable to work with kindergarten teachers on the pretext of lack of time and pressure to implement the curriculum of the language course at the Primary School, which is associated with the completion of the teaching of the totality of the curriculum (socio-historical dimension). In fact, the kindergarten teachers attribute the lack of cooperation with first-grade primary school teachers to the school daily life and the unavailability of the latter.

The findings of this study on the difficulties and reduced collaboration between teachers and kindergarten teachers are consistent with findings from other research from Greece (Vrinioti, 2010) and the international community (Ackesjö, 2013). Also, research that reflects the international educational reality reveals, like this study, that despite the lack of effective

collaboration between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers, the educators understand the benefits of promoting such collaboration for the students (see: Ahtola et al., 2011; Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Margetts, 2002; Niesel & Griebel, 2007). An ongoing and systematic joint training in issues of modern teaching could contribute to the resolution of the lack of cooperation between teachers of different levels. This is because it would help them understand how their colleagues from other educational levels work (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011), it would highlight the difficulties of each level in terms of the language teaching approach and it would motivate them to find solutions together (Alatalo et al., 2016; Hjelte, 2005; Vrinoti, 2010). In fact, the promotion of cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers based on a balanced curriculum for the teaching of literacy ensuring the continuity of teaching interventions in the next level (Ottley et al., 2015; Pressley, 2002; Pearson et al., 2007), would contribute to the smoother transition of children to Primary School (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016; Broström, 2002).

Promoting literacy in childhood through a balanced curriculum is directly linked to students' subsequent school success or failure (UNESCO, 2005). This is owed to the fact that it seems to determine in the long run for every child, young person or adult the acquisition of basic language skills and the promotion of communication, thus contributing to social welfare, social justice and the development of democracy (UNESCO, 2007, 2015, 2017).

The findings of this study delineate the necessity to cultivate and develop a culture of cooperation between kindergarten teachers and first-grade primary school teachers with the contribution of institutional interventions related to the implementation of a continuous and systematic joint training process on modern teaching of literacy on a theoretical and practical level. Furthermore, aiming at strengthening the physical literacy of students, a framework of cooperation between kindergarten teachers and teachers of the first grade of Primary Schools could be formed under the supervision and pedagogical guidance of the coordinators of pre-school education and primary education, with the participation of parents as well (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017).

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