

Original Paper

Criteria of Parents for Choosing Preschool Centers during the Period of Economic Crisis in Greece

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Abstract

Background: The provision of qualitative early childhood care and education are priorities for European Member States. High quality program have positive outcomes for all children and specially those of disadvantaged social groups.

Aim: The aim of the present study was to detect the criteria by which Greek parents evaluate Preschool Centers for the care and education of their children in the preschool age.

Methodology: 315 parents of low income with children aged 2.5-5 years old answered the research questionnaire.

Results: Greek parents consider as the most important elements of early childhood care and education quality the good relationship between educators and children (100%), the pleasant learning environment (100%), the respect of children with special needs (97%), the program's emphasis on the children's social development (98%), on emotional development (94%) and on good nutrition (94%). Greek parents, despite the period of economic crisis that plagues society, focus on qualitative criteria such as the services offered by preschool centers (93%), the natural environment of the setting (87%), and the program applied (82%). They put on a second role operational criteria for preschool centers, which would facilitate them on a personal level, such as location and cost.

Keywords: Greece, Preschool Education, and parents' attitude, selection criteria of Preschool Center, parents' expectations

Introduction

In the beginning of the 21st century most developed countries have shown great interest in the early childhood education. According to a statement of the Council of the European Union, by 2020 in all Member States of the European Union at least 95% of children aged 4 years and up to the beginning of compulsory primary education should participate in some form of early childhood education (Official Journal of the European Union 2011). This interest is due to the

recognition of the contribution of women to economic development and the research findings that have shown the crucial role of the early years of children's lives in their own subsequent development and in the society to which they belong. Over the last decades women are considered as key factors of the dynamic economies (NESSE 2009). For this reason member states of the EU in order to ensure womens' participation in the labor market and to enable them to combine work with family

obligations, proceeded to organize services that provide treatment and care for children from the first year of their life. Early childhood education was associated with the participation of women at work, served the relevant societal requirements and was not treated as a separate educational process. In Greece it seems that the services offered by preschool education are appreciated while factors associated with the quality and adequacy of care services do not form deterrent working reasons for mothers, since are found at low rates (16.67%) compared with the corresponding European average (25,85%) (Unicef 2014).

Today research has shown that early childhood education is associated with the development of sociability of children with fewer behavioral problems, with the cultivation of mathematical and reading skills and their later school success (Burchinal et al 2010). Thus, the provision of appropriate treatment and care experiences in early childhood when behaviors and attitudes have not been definitively configured can reduce subsequent costs associated with health problems (obesity, drug use, etc.), with poor school performance, with adolescent delinquency etc. Furthermore it can help increase productivity by involving children in their adult life in the workforce of the country.

Lately it is strongly supported that investing in early childhood education has greater reciprocal benefits from investing in any other level of education (European Commission 2011). However, this depends on the quality of preschool educational and care programs. High quality programs have positive outcomes for all children and especially those of disadvantaged social groups. But when the quality is low the positive impact weakens and the negative consequences are not excluded. For this reason, the quality of programs for preschoolers engage all those involved, including the operators who offer these programs, scientists who organize them and parents who choose them. However, it cannot be defined in a generally acceptable manner, because it is influenced and often is determined by the particularities of society in which the programs are addressed. In the US, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) for the evaluation of

early childhood care and education programs uses ten criteria that relate to: the relationship of educators with children, program content, teaching, assessment of children's progress, promotion of children's health and safety, educators' qualifications, collaboration of educators with parents, cooperation with social agents, the natural environment and the organization and management of the institution (NAEYC Accreditation 2008). These criteria are often used by agencies in organizing and improving early childhood care and education programs. This does not ensure the attendance of quality programs from all children, because many parents in selecting institutions that will accommodate their children give weight to personal criteria, such as whether the program supports their cultural background, whether the institute is near their house, the cost of hospitality etc. (Sandstrom & Chaudry 2012).

Though parent's value for quality in selecting a care arrangement is clear from the literature, parents' definitions of "quality" care vary. Researches in Greece and abroad, showed that parents tend to overestimate early childhood education, in relation to the evaluation by professional educators (Cryer et al 2002, Knoche et al 2006, Torquati et al 2011, Rentzou & Sakellariou 2013). Specifically in Greece, in surveys conducted in preschools and kindergartens by applying the scales of "Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Parent Questionnaire" (ECERSPQ) and "Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised" (ECERS-R), it was observed that parents were assessing with a higher rate the educational procedure which was applicable to their children, than the rating given by trained observers (Grammatikopoulos et al 2014). Particularly, with regard to day care centers in related researches, it was observed that parents evaluated with a higher rate and were also more interested in the area of care from that in the education of children, than researchers who were specialized in preschool education and care (Rentzou & Sakellariou 2013). The above variations were attributed by the researchers to various reasons such as incomplete information on the everyday life of children in the classroom, or to that they evaluated the quality based on their own

expectations, or their views on the way care and education should be provided to their children.

Aim

The purpose of this research is to detect the criteria by which Greek parents evaluate the operation and offering of Preschool Centers in nursery care and education of their children in the preschool age. The research questions which were addressed are: a) What are the criteria by which Greek parents evaluate Preschool Centers and what aspects of Preschool Center do parents value as more important? b) Whether the economic crisis tempers parents' expectations regarding the education of early childhood.

Methodology

Parents of preschool children were asked to grade specific qualities and aspects of Preschool Centers by using a Likert type (Javeau 1996) on a five points scale (1 = absolutely disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = I agree, 5 = absolutely agree) aiming to elicit information on a series of features concerning program, teaching, educators and the building of the Preschool Centers. The questionnaire consisted of 37 questions. The first 6 questions were related to a) the demographics characteristics of the participants, b) 8 questions to the program, c) 7 to teaching, 6 to educators, d) 4 to the building and e) 6 to the choice of the Preschool Centers by parents. The questions about the program, teaching and educators were formed according to the evaluation criteria which are used by the National Association for the education of young children (NAEYC accreditation 2008).

Given the proven deviation that present the scales ECERS-R and ECERSPQ in their use by parents, we decided to avoid them, as we considered that they were created in order to be implemented by experts in education. On the basis of the criteria above, a questionnaire was structured by three researchers-educators. The questionnaire was submitted to the pre-test procedure, which was implemented in a sample of 10 parents, and then adjustments were made in accordance with the feedback gained from the pre-test. As the purpose of our research was the views of parents in a period of economic crisis, we focused our research only in public preschool centers, where

children are being accepted based on financial criteria, as public preschool centers are addressed mainly to parents who do not have high financial income. Four hundreds questionnaires were distributed and 315 were returned (response rate 78.75%). Thus the survey involved 315 parents from Northern Greece, 61 men and 254 women with children aged 2.5-5 years, of which 152 were boys and 163 were girls. A 50.8% of parents were high school graduates and a 46.7% were higher education graduates. Parents were called to spontaneously answer the research questionnaire during the school year 2013-2014. Statistical analysis of data was performed with SPSS 21.0 package which includes indicators of descriptive statistics while at the level of inferential statistics was applied the analysis of variance with one factor (one way ANOVA) and also was attempted the statistical analysis procedure of clusters (cluster analysis), namely the K-means cluster method. The level of significance for correlations was $p < 0.05$, while in cluster analysis the reference of 2 distinct groups.

Results

Parents consider very important for the program to support the socio-emotional development of children, healthy living (diet & exercise) as well as culture and language. Parents consider relatively important the development of academic skills (arithmetic, reading and writing) of their children, while contact with the computer does not seem to particularly concern them for their children at this age. In table 1 the views of parents about aspects of the program of Preschool Centers that are considered important are presented, while in table 2 parents views about aspects teaching of Preschool Centers that are considered as important are presented. In table 3 the parents views about the desirable teacher educator profile are shown. Moreover, table 4 shows the desirable for parents physical environment of the Preschool Centers, while in table 5 factors that considered important the selection of preschool centers. Table 6 resents the parents views about priority contribution of preschool center. In table 7 the correlation results (ANOVA test) $p \leq 0.05$ are presented, while in table 8 a K-Mean Cluster Analysis is presented.

Table 1. Parents views about aspects of the Preschool Centers programs that are considered as important

Statements	Mean	S D	%				
			1	2	3	4	5
Social development	4.77	.467			1.9	19.7	78.4
Good nutrition	4.64	.587			5.7	24.4	69.8
Emotional development	4.63	.589			5.7	25.1	69.2
Language development	4.47	.728		1.6	9.2	29.8	59.4
Physical activity	4.42	.783		2.5	10.8	28.6	58.1
Early Childhood mathematics	3.82	1.099	3.2	8.3	27.3	26.3	34.9
Early Literacy	3.62	1.197	5.4	12.7	27.0	24.1	30.8
Use of computer	2.34	1.117	27.9	29.5	27.6	10.8	4.1

1: I absolutely disagree, 2: I disagree, 3: I neither agree nor disagree, 4: I agree, 5: I absolutely agree

Table 2. Parents views about teaching of Preschool Center that are considered as important

Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	%				
			1	2	3	4	5
Relationships educator with children	4.88	.335			.3	11.4	88.3
Pleasant & appropriate learning environment	4.87	.342			.3	12.1	87.6
Respect to disability and inclusion	4.83	.451		.3	2.2	11.4	86.0
Respect for different ethnic	4.51	.775	1.0	1.3	7.9	25.1	64.8
Respect for religion	4.40	.832	1.3	1.0	12.1	27.6	58.1
Small-group learning	4.37	.869		4.1	13.7	23.2	59.0
Teaching all students together	2.79	1.296	21.0	21.9	25.4	20.3	11.4

1: I absolutely disagree, 2: I disagree, 3: I neither agree nor disagree, 4: I agree, 5: I absolutely agree

According to the table 2, parents consider as the most basic element of teaching in Preschool Centers the warm and encouraging relationship of educators with children. They regard as a particularly important element the occupation of children in a cheerful environment whilst they prefer their children

to be occupied in small groups rather than all together in one space. It is also noted the view they express regarding the respect to children with specificities, respect to different nationality as well as religion. Alongside, it appears that they do not prefer a single teaching to all the children together.

Table 3. Desirable aspects of the teacher educator profile

Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	%				
			1	2	3	4	5
Professional Development	4.52	.673		.6	8.3	29.2	61.9
Collaboration between staff	4.51	.715		1.3	9.2	26.7	62.9
Collaboration with experts	4.48	.893	2.2	2.9	5.4	23.5	66.0
Cooperation with parents	4.39	.857	1.0	2.9	10.5	27.6	58.1
Consultation with parents about the program	4.37	.888	1.0	3.8	10.5	26.3	58.4
Educational level of teacher educators	4.06	.988	2.2	4.4	19.4	33.3	40.6

1: I absolutely disagree, 2: I disagree, 3: I neither agree nor disagree, 4: I agree, 5: I absolutely agree

Table 4. Physical environment

Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	%				
			1	2	3	4	5
Schoolyard	4.6159	.64965		.6	7.3	21.9	70.2
Close to home	3.8762	.99388	1.3	7.6	25.7	33.0	32.4
Building infrastructure	3.3524	1.30395	10.2	18.4	21.9	25.1	24.4
School bus	3.1365	1.17989	9.5	20.0	32.7	22.9	14.9

1: I absolutely disagree, 2: I disagree, 3: I neither agree nor disagree, 4: I agree, 5: I absolutely agree

Table 5. Selection factors of preschool centers

Statements	Mean	Std.Dev.	%				
			1	2	3	4	5
Services	4.5492	.62838			7.3	30.5	62.2
Natural environment	4.4254	.76757		2.2	10.5	29.8	57.5
Program	4.2381	.83921	.3	3.5	13.7	37.1	45.4
Reputation	4.1079	1.01003	1.3	6.7	18.4	27.3	46.3
Location	3.9683	1.00901	1.6	6.7	22.9	31.1	37.8
Tuition rates	3.5333	1.03813	3.5	10.5	35.6	30.2	20.3

1: I absolutely disagree, 2: I disagree, 3: I neither agree nor disagree, 4: I agree, 5: I absolutely agree

Table 6. Priority contribution of preschool center

Statements	N	%
Socialization	175	55.6
supports children's positive learning	64	20.3
child's autonomy	46	14.6
preparation for primary school	29	9.2

Table 7. Correlation of statements (ANOVA test) $p \leq 0.05$

According to parent's sex					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Building infrastructure	9.402	1	9.402	5.611	.018
Collaboration between staff	2.841	1	2.841	5.634	.018
According to parent's age					
Respect to disability and inclusion	1.205	2	.603	2.990	.052
Relationships educator with children	1.051	2	.525	4.770	.009
Consultation with parents about the program	4.544	2	2.272	2.914	.054
Collaboration with experts	4.777	2	2.388	3.031	.050
Language development	4.668	2	2.334	4.501	.012
Reputation	9.284	2	4.642	4.656	.010
According to parent Graduation's Levels					
Close to home	7.828	3	2.609	2.684	.047
School bus	12.605	3	4.202	3.078	.028
Teaching all students together	15.154	3	5.051	3.066	.028
Respect to disability & inclusion	1.858	3	.619	3.095	.027
Relationships educator with children	1.368	3	.456	4.164	.007
Location	10.076	3	3.359	3.374	.019
Natural environment	4.952	3	1.651	2.851	.038
Services	5.319	3	1.773	4.646	.003
According to gender of child					
Building infrastructure	6.984	1	6.984	4.149	.043
Consultation with parents about the program	4.147	1	4.147	5.327	.022
According to age of child					
Relationships educator with children	1.844	3	.615	5.693	.001
Services	4.355	3	1.452	3.773	.011
Reputation	9.692	3	3.231	3.235	.023
All the above are under the statistical significance $p \leq 0.05$					

Table 8. K-Mean Cluster Analysis

		Demanding N=197 (62.5%)	Moderate N=118 (37.5%)
Physical environment	Close to home	4.09	3.52
	Building infrastructure	3.73	2.73
Teacher educator profile	Educational level of teacher educators	4.39	3.51
	Consultation with parents about the program	4.62	3.96
	Collaboration with experts	4.83	3.90
Views about aspects of the program of Preschool Center	Language development	4.76	3.99
	Early Childhood mathematics	4.34	2.94
	Early Literacy	4.22	2.63
	Use of computer	2.70	1.73
	Physical activity	4.65	4.03
Selection factors of preschool centers	Location	4.26	3.47
	Program	4.49	3.81
	Natural environment	4.63	4.08
	Services	4.77	4.18
	Reputation	4.47	3.51

Additionally the Cluster Analysis for the determination of parents' groups that would be distinguished by a kind of "typology" of the valuation criteria of the Preschool Centers for the education of their children in early childhood was applied. In particular was applied the methodology K-Means Cluster seeking solution to the composition of 2 distinct groups. As is clear from the above analysis two groups of parents are revealed. The quantitatively dominant group A (N=197, 62.5%) seems more "demanding" as places particular emphasis compared with group B on issues such as location of the Preschool Centers, the available facilities, the educational level of teacher educators and their cooperation with parents and experts, present high expectations of all aspects of the program, while giving increased emphasis on all the selection criteria of the Preschool Centers. On the other hand, group B (N=118, 37.5%) despite the "modest" profile which is

assigned to it in the conventional confrontation with the other group, maintains at a high level the requirements in the basic issues concerning the operation of the Preschool Center's structure.

As priority of the contribution of Preschool Centers is selected at a high rate the child's socialization, whilst follows the culture of its ability to learn. It does not seem to be the main purpose of the contribution of the Preschool Centers the autonomy of the child, while is noted that it is not a priority of the expectations of parents the child's preparation for his studies in the elementary school. Parents in order to choose Preschool Centers take into account a number of factors. However they give priority to services offered by the Preschool Centers, to the natural environment that surrounds it and the program implemented. While comparatively it seems that they care less the

reputation that the Preschool Centers has or the site where is located. The money they have to pay for the child's hosting seems that it counts however they do not consider it at a high priority criterion.

Significant differences were observed on these views when correlated with the age of parent, with parents aged 31-40 years old, who were notably interested in the linguistic culture of the child (see Table 7, $p = 0.012$) in relation to parents of other age levels.

Parents aged 31-40 years old give a strong emphasis on the relationship between educator and children (see Table 7, $p = 0.009$), while younger parents give greater importance in their child's raising towards disabled people (see Table 7, $p = 0.052$). More tolerant to a single teaching to their children are parents with low educational level (see Table 7, $p = 0.009$), while parents with high educational level of a particular focus on his relationship with his children teacher (see Table 7, $p = 0.007$) and in raising their children toward people with disabilities (see Table 7, $p = 0.027$). Parents with younger age infants give greater emphasis on educators' relationship with their children than parents with older children (see Table 7, $p = 0.001$).

According to parents it is very important for educators to be trained regularly and cooperate with other factors in the educational process, particularly with scientists, with parents for the program to be implemented and to address the problems of children and each other. Also parents appear to ask for their child's educator to have adequate educational level. Men parents wish more cooperation and consultation between educators (see Table 7, $p = 0.018$). Parents aged 31-40 years old expect in a greater degree than other parents to cooperate with educators for the program to be applied (see Table 7, $p = 0.054$) and the cooperation of educators with specialists (see Table 7, $p =$

0.050). Boys parents look more forward to the program applied (see Table 7, $p = 0.022$).

Parents find very important the existence of an outdoor yard at the Preschool Centers, while for operational reasons they prefer to be close to the residence of the child. Men parents pay more attention to the building infrastructure (see Table 7, $p = 0.018$), while parents with lower educational level seem to care more about whether the station is close to home (see Table 7, $p = 0.047$) or whether they have school bus (see Table 7, $p = 0.028$) than parents with higher educational level. Of particular importance is the building infrastructure for boys' parents (see Table 7, $p = 0.043$).

The reputation of the Preschool Centers holds more interest for those aged 31-40 years old (see Table 7, $p = 0.010$). Parents with low educational level focus with special emphasis on the position and nature of Preschool Centers (see Table 7, $p = 0.019$ & $p = 0.038$), while parents with middle level education are more interested in the services provided (see Table 7, $p = 0.003$). Parents of older infants do not seem to have as a high priority the reputation of the Preschool Centers and the services provided (see Table 7, $p = 0.023$ & $p = 0.011$).

Discussion

According to the European Commission (European Commission 2011), the extension of the provision of early childhood education and the quality of early childhood care and education are priorities for European Member States. In this context, the Greek state voted as compulsory for children aged 5 years old to attend a Preschool Centers (Greek GG FEK 272/τ.A/21-12-2006) and monitors the quality of care and education provided to younger children through their hospitality in Preschool Centers (Greek GG FEK 497/τ.B/22-4-2002). However, the quality of early childhood education and care is a relative term and often determined by the

different people involved (Rentzou 2012). Scientific associations consider that compliance with the international standards for the organization and operation of Preschool Centers ensure high-quality early childhood care and education, while parents often evaluate it based on personal views and beliefs (Rentzou 2012, Yamamoto & Li 2012, Grogan 2012). In this research we detected the criteria that parents consider important for the education and care in early childhood, so as to investigate the aspect of Greek parents regarding the quality of early childhood education and care by grading a series of factors relevant to the daily program, teaching, the teacher educators and the building infrastructure of the Preschool Center. Results showed that Greek parents with some variations according to their age and education specify the qualitative early childhood care and education as defined by the relevant professional and scientific organizations (NAEYC, NICDH), focusing their interest in these areas.

More specifically, regarding the program we found that they consider it important to completely support the development of the child, but they give different weights to individual sectors. In their view, it is important to support the social and emotional development as well as healthy living for children and follow the culture of academic skills related to future school performance. It is noted that these views here are close to the modern trend of participation in early childhood care (UNICEF, 2014) which consciously deviates from the preparation for the formal education system. Apart from the linguistic education which parents consider very important, their interest in developing mathematical literacy skills and abilities is limited. At this point Greek parents contradict with the emphasis given by many early childhood programs in the development of literacy and mathematical skills that prepare children for school attendance

(Pantazis & Potsi 2013). Greek parents, like parents in other countries (Rose & Elicker 2008) consider very important early childhood teacher educators to be university graduates and to be trained regularly. This view is consistent with that of the Greek state that highly qualified staff is a key element for a qualitative early childhood education and care.

However, just high qualifications do not ensure learning in children. In order to have high qualifications the expected positive results should lead to high-quality emotional and instructional interactions between the teacher educator and children, as they are the mechanism by which programs carry social, linguistic and academic skills in children (Mashburn et al 2008). Greek parents agree with this view as they find the friendly and supportive relationship of the teacher educator with children alongside with their occupation in a cheerful environment as the most important element of the educational process. These findings agree with those of other surveys which have shown that parents considered as key elements of high quality pre-school establishments the warm relationship of teacher educators with children (Rose & Elicker 2008) and cheerful and provided rich material environment (Yamamoto & Li 2012, Shlay 2010).

Furthermore Greek parents particularly appreciate the cooperation of teacher educators with parents and their respect for disabled persons, especially for children with special needs. When choosing Preschool Centers Greek parents give priority to the services offered, its natural environment and the program, while they downgrade personal criteria such as the convenient location and the cost of hosting the child. Generally, Greek parents despite the economic crisis that plagues society and imposes considerable restrictions on lifestyle, insist on assessing the work of Preschool Centers based on qualitative characteristics relating to

teacher educators, teaching and program, while they also take into account physical characteristics of the Preschool Centers and put at a second role practical reasons concerning them.

Limitations of the research

The findings of the present study cannot be generalized because the participants were only parents whose children were enrolled in public Preschool Centers, where children are selected on the basis of their families' low income. Our sample also comes only from a limited area of Greece.

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