



The institution of compulsory preschool education in Greece

Vasilios Oikonomidis

University of Crete,
Faculty of Education,
Department of Preschool Education,
University Campus,
Rethymno,
Greece
Email: vasoikon@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Compulsory preschool education for 5-year-old children was instituted by law in Greece in 2006. However, the implementation of the law encountered several problems. This article, on the occasion of the recent institution of compulsory preschool education in Greece, discusses in a critical manner the views that have been voiced in favour and against it and offers an insight of the corresponding situation in other European countries. This article analyses the corresponding legislative course in Greece, focusing on data from the last three years. It identifies and presents oversights and omissions that characterize the implementation of the aforementioned law. Finally, the article offers suggestions that can contribute to the improvement of preschool education in Greece. In this way, the article criticizes the Greek government policy, a policy that governments from other countries must avoid during their efforts to institute compulsory preschool education.*

Keywords: Preschool education, Greece, European countries

Preschool education in focus

Attending kindergarten is considered very important in a child's scholastic career as it offers the best possible conditions for cognitive, social and emotional development. It lays sound foundations at an age considered especially critical for cognitive and social-emotional development (Leseman, 2009; Alevriadou et al., 2008; Theophilidis, 2010). The systematization of education at kindergarten also derives from social reasons such as:

- Change in the structure and the functions of the family: increase in the number of working mothers and of hours they are absent from home, generalization of the type of nuclear family; as a result, there is a lack of relatives who used to be involved in the education of children, increase in the number of single parent families, decrease in the number of available hours spent by parents with their children (Eurydice, 2009b; Zambeta, 2004).
- Change in the structure and function of neighbourhoods, lack of safe public spaces, mainly in urban areas, where preschool aged children could meet, play and be entertained in a creative manner (Zambeta, 2004; Kyprianos, 2007).
- Greater expectations due to a widened curriculum during compulsory elementary school, which result in a need for better and deeper maturity and “preparation” of children who are about to attend first grade at elementary school (Kyprianos 2007).
- Multi-cultural societies promote the strengthening of education at kindergarten so that a smooth integration of different cultural entities into the social framework may take place in order to cultivate tolerance and acceptance of diversity (Eurydice, 2009b; Gammage, 2003; Kyprianos 2007).

The aforementioned reasons have led preschool education, at least at European level, to become more important than in the past and its upgrade to be attempted through better studies of its educational staff, change and improvement in curricula, emphasis on the educational procedure and through a more structural integration in the educational system (Eurydice, 2009b; Zambeta, 2004; Tafa, forthcoming). Besides, the use of the term Preschool Education might reflect this change in attitudes (European Commission, 1995; Eurydice, 1994, 2009b; Zambeta, 2004), since it denotes that education (mainly of children of 3-6

years old) takes place at an educational institution (kindergarten) by specialized educators (kindergarten teachers) (Kitsaras, 2001).

Arguments on the compulsory aspect of preschool education

As in most matters relating to pedagogy and education, opinions differ on the question of mandatory attendance in kindergarten. There are scientists, educators and politicians, who argue that the institution of compulsory attendance in kindergarten will only have positive results on children and society, and others, who argue that these results are neither always positive nor so permanent. In the next paragraphs I will attempt a brief presentation of the positions for and against compulsory preschool education and a general commentary.

Supporters of compulsory attendance base their opinion on the positive effects of attendance in kindergarten:

- Results of several studies showed that children who attended quality preschool education programmes have received considerable help in their mental and socio-emotional development and maturity (Doliopoulou, 2008; Leseman, 2009; Weikar, 2000; Melhuish et al. 2001; Melhuish et al., 2006).

Surveys have shown that providing quality education in an extended time frame (all-day kindergarten) during early childhood enhances the cognitive abilities of children (Sylva et al., 2004), so that they are more ready to respond in their role as students at elementary school (Sammons et al., 2004), increases the chances of children for successful school progress, provides motivation for learning, contributes to the adoption of a positive attitude towards school (Doliopoulou, 2003; Koutsouvanou & Chrysafidis, 2000; McClelland, Acock & Morrison, 2006; Gorey, 2001; Blok et al., 2005).

The compensatory function of kindergarten is considered very important to children who come from lower social backgrounds and vulnerable social groups, as it constitutes a mechanism for halting educational inequalities that affect the entire educational life and professional career of a person (Pyrgiotakis, 1992). Therefore, mandatory attendance

ensures the positive effects of that compensation (Kitsaras, 2001; Love et al., 2005; Gilliam & Zigler, 2000).

- Children attending kindergarten face fewer problems during their transition and adaptation to elementary school (Sammons et al., 2004), especially when during their study period at kindergarten respective programmes are developed (Alevriadou et al., 2008; Pantazis, 2005; Kitsaras, 2001).
- Attendance in kindergarten allows the identification of learning difficulties and offers the opportunity for early intervention thereby facilitating the adoption of a more effective manner of dealing with these difficulties (Kitsaras, 2001).

The extent of compulsory schooling is considered an indicator and an agent of growth for every country, since it shows the interest of the state to modernize education, which in turn produces human capital for the development of the country that is both considerable and able. Investing in human capital is socially and economically more effective when targeted at early childhood education (Heckman, 2006; Penn, 2002; Bennett, 2003; Kitsaras, 2001).

The arguments of those in favour of compulsory education in kindergarten are actually the same arguments that support optional and generalized attendance in kindergarten, since positive results are also obtained when attendance is optional. However, they are used to support this compulsory aspect from the perspective that the results of schooling must be offered to all children and that it is the duty of the state and in its interest to ensure this. It is worth noting the apt observation made by Zambeta (2004) that the positive effects of preschool education cannot be interpreted independently of the socioeconomic and cultural context in which they are identified and that attendance in preschool education cannot be seen as the main factor for the shaping of personality, of the school and personal progress of the child, ignoring other social and psychological factors. Therefore, the limits of the positive effects of preschool education do not extend to infinity, attendance in kindergarten is neither a panacea, nor the sole factor determining the development and progress of the child, but providing quality preschool education is a positive starting point for the development of children.

Those who support the non- compulsory attendance in kindergarten base their opinion on the dubious continuance of the initial positive results of attendance in kindergarten as well as on considerations of pedagogical nature:

- Attendance in kindergarten does not always entail better school performance for children, as this might make them lose their interest in school and learning. It is also argued that even the positive results of attendance in kindergarten are not permanent, given the fact that several studies have shown that they fade away in the next school levels (Gilliam & Zigler, 2000; HSLDA 2009a; Tafa, forthcoming; Zacharenakis, 1991).
- The results of assessment tests carried out within the framework of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) programme do not justify the countries that have established preschool education as mandatory or the ones that begin the teaching of mainly language and mathematical skills very early (Doliopoulou, 2008).
- Compulsory early childhood education is the risk of turning it into regular schooling, which can occur either because of the pressure exercised on kindergarten teachers by parents to teach letters and numbers to children or through the misinterpretation of its compulsory aspect and deviation to strictly structured teaching of an academic character and target (Kitsaras, 2001; Doliopoulou, 2008; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Leseman, 2009).
- Compulsory attendance in early childhood education violates the right of parents to decide for their children's education (Doliopoulou, 2008).

Arguments of those against compulsory attendance essentially attempt to answer the arguments of those who support it. We believe that these arguments are not particularly convincing in several points:

- The failure of children who have attended kindergarten in subsequent education levels is not necessarily the result of failure of schooling in kindergarten, but is rather due to problems occurring during the attendance of subsequent education

levels. This is particularly true when the initial achievements of children in mental and socio-emotional fields were not maintained in subsequent education levels. Therefore, this raises the following question: is school education after kindergarten not of similar quality so as to help maintain and enhance the positive effects of schooling in kindergarten? So, if the initial achievements of children during their attendance to Kindergarten are not maintained, the reason for that may be a bad quality education during school years after preschool education.

- The examination of pre-adolescent students in mathematics, language and natural sciences, as carried out within the framework of the PISA programme, is not considered a reliable assessment of preschool education, because of the long time that has lapsed between the examination and the attendance of kindergarten and because of the strictly academic character of the examination, which is outside the goals of preschool education. Besides, the social and emotional development, the transmission of values and attitudes, smooth integration into society and acceptance of others are key objectives of preschool, primary and secondary education, which are not assessed by PISA-type tests.
- The risk of turning kindergarten into regular schooling is a real danger even when attendance is not compulsory. As Tafa (forthcoming) argues, the danger becomes even greater because of the existence of a curriculum, of the pressure exercised by parents, of kindergarten teachers' personal views and, of course, because of the methods and practices of teaching and learning that will follow. We believe that a modern system of preschool education cannot exclude activities related to language, mathematics, physical and social studies and ICTs, when children themselves have a variety of relevant experiences from their everyday life or can build on stimuli provided by the kindergarten teacher (Tafa, forthcoming). Turning kindergarten into regular schooling has to do, in my opinion, with the type of approach and not with the cognitive subjects. Therefore, when one keeps the playful, spontaneous, child-centred and appropriate -on a developmental level- way of teaching and learning, the risk of turning kindergarten schooling into regular schooling is reduced (Dickinson et al., 2003; Leseman, 2009). We argue that the compulsory aspect of preschool education is not necessarily to blame for turning

kindergarten into regular schooling. Besides the introduction of workbooks in Greek kindergarten during the 1990's, which was seen as an indication of turning kindergarten into regular schooling, was implemented at a time when preschool education was not compulsory (Kitsaras, 2001).

- Why is the right of parents to decide on the education of their children violated when it comes to preschool education at the age of 5 and not when it comes to primary education at the age of 6? The views on the violation of the parents' right are expressed mainly by organizations and programmes (for example HSLDA 2009b), that promote care and education of children either at home or at any house in the neighbourhood by parents who assume this role, often receiving pay for it (Eurydice 2009b). On the issue of home preschool education (not training), questions have been raised about the knowledge of pedagogy, psychology and teaching skills of the person who undertakes the care of children, the political, social and pedagogical basis of these programmes, the inadequate state control about the above matters but also the serious risk of the involvement of para-religious or similar organizations, which consider that the country's education system "corrupts" children (HSLDA, 2009b). Also, programmes of home preschool education do not help the integration of children into the education system and are less effective than formal education (Eurydice, 2009b; Leseman, 2009).

Compulsory preschool education in Europe

Most European countries acknowledge the importance of preschool education and are particularly interested in its expansion despite the existence of multiple institutions providing preschool education in each country (Leseman, 2009; Kyprianos, 2007). Obviously, the decisions made by every country regarding the monitoring, provision, expansion and mandatory aspect of preschool education do not take into account only the educational views, but also views related to educational policy, political and economic conditions and the particular conditions of each country. In more than half of the countries in Europe, children enter the educational system at the age of 3-4, studying in institutions supervised by the respective National Ministry of Education (Eurydice 2009a). In some countries (French and Flemish speaking parts of Belgium, France, Northern Ireland) integration in the educational system begins at the age of 2 or 2.6. In the Baltic countries,

Slovenia, Sweden and Norway, children can attend at the age of 1 in institutions supervised by the respective National Ministry of Education, but they do not enter the educational system. In Austria, Denmark, Finland and in most states of Germany, children before the age of 5-6 enter preschool education structures that are not supervised by the Ministry of Education. In Ireland and the Netherlands, 4-5 year old children can attend infant classes of elementary school (Eurydice, 2009a; Kyprianos, 2007; Tafa, forthcoming).

Attendance in preschool education in most European countries is optional and compulsory schooling usually begins at 6 years of age through entry into the elementary school. Attendance in preschool education is mandatory for children aged 5-6 in Greece, Latvia, Poland and Hungary, for children aged 4.8 in Cyprus, for children aged 4 in Luxembourg and for non-German speaking children aged 5-6 in Liechtenstein in order to promote the knowledge of the German language (Eurydice, 2009a; Kyprianos, 2007; Tafa, forthcoming). Therefore, Greece is among the countries of Europe that place early childhood education at the age of 4-6 under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and have adopted the compulsory attendance in kindergarten at the ages of 5-6.

Compulsory preschool education in Greece

In Greece, attending kindergarten became compulsory for one year for children who "*on December 31st of the enrolment year reach the age of five (5)*" (L. 3518, article 73, paragraph 1, Official Gazette no. 272 vol. A, 21.12.2006).

However, the question of compulsory attendance in kindergarten begins from the first decades of the 20th century. In 1913, the bills submitted (but not passed) by the then Minister of Education I. Tsirimokos proposed compulsory attendance at public kindergartens that would be established in areas that were freed after the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913 (New Territories) for 4 year old pupils in order to enhance the Greek language. Therefore, the then proposed compulsory aspect of kindergarten involved children of certain areas, where the use and knowledge of the Greek language was not satisfactory (Kyprianos 2007 · Kitsaras 2001).

Sixty three years later, Law 309, article 4, paragraph 3, Official Gazette no. 100, vol. A, 30.04.1976 stated that attendance at kindergarten "*can become compulsory*" in

areas of the country which will be designated by presidential decree, based on proposals by the Ministers of Education and Economy. This provision treated compulsory attendance at kindergarten as a possibility, and even suggested it might not be regarded as compulsory across the whole country. This provision raises three issues:

- a) What criteria will be used to designate areas where attendance is compulsory?
There are no such criteria mentioned by the law. So this is a very unclear condition for the compulsory attendance at Kindergarten.
- b) What does the phrase "*can become compulsory*" mean? Kitsaras (2001) cites the position of the then Deputy Minister of Education (as recorded in the Proceedings of Parliament) that the use of the phrase "may become" wishes to emphasize that "there should be kindergartens, where parents would have the possibility to take their children, if they wished to do so". In our opinion, this view is entirely contradictory, given the fact that the institution of compulsory attendance at kindergarten supersedes and deals in a legislative manner with any personal wishes of parents ("*if they wished to do so*") to enrol their children in kindergarten.
- c) the institution of compulsory attendance in kindergarten based on a selection of specific geographical areas, without setting clear criteria and implementing a precise timetable, introduces elements of educational inequality.

Law 1566 article 3, paragraph 4, redrafted the aforementioned provision as follows: "*attendance in kindergarten becomes compulsory by stages and by specific areas of the country designated by joint decision of the Ministers of National Education & Religious Affairs, Health, Welfare & Social Insurance and Finance*" Compared to Law 309/1976, this provision maintains both the mandatory aspect by area and the potential aspect of its implementation, since the expression "*becomes compulsory by stages*" is quite vague and does not refer to neither a clear timetable nor the criteria for its implementation. The aforementioned provision also includes the Ministry of Health, Welfare & Social Security, which supervises nurseries.

Since then, compulsory attendance in kindergarten has not been the object of discussions again by the Greek state, at least on a legislative text level (Zambeta, 2004).

Pressure regarding the institution of compulsory attendance in kindergarten has been exercised steadily by the Hellenic Teachers' Federation (DOE) lobbying for "*two-year compulsory preschool education*", but this institutional demand was not always high enough on its claim agenda (DOE, 2006); the same applied for some political parties that included the introduction of compulsory schooling in kindergarten in their electoral commitments during election campaigns.

In October 2006, during a strike with mainly economic demands of the Hellenic Teachers' Federation (2006) that lasted for twelve days and was considered successful, the conservative government of Nea Dimokratia and its Minister of Education Mrs. M. Giannakou decided the institution of compulsory attendance in kindergarten pursuant to Law 3518/2006, as mentioned above. The law provides for compulsory attendance in kindergarten (without controversies, ambiguities and exceptions) throughout the country (and not only in specific areas) of all children residing in Greece who turn five by December 31st of the enrolment year. Thus, starting from the school year 2007-2008, all children of this age must attend kindergarten for one year (infants aged 5-6), so that when they receive their Certificate of Attendance in Kindergarten, they can enrol in the next year in the first grade of primary school (for the children who turn six by December 31st).

However, what followed showed that the Government had not studied the matter thoroughly before proceeding with the introduction of the compulsory aspect of kindergarten. In an effort probably to weaken the strike front of the Hellenic Teachers' Federation (DOE), to defuse the tense political situation and to deal with a strike with mainly economic demands, the then government had accepted the realization of an institutional claim by DOE (2006) and the then opposition socialist party (PASOK). Moreover, the government had not made the necessary planning to support mandatory attendance, which included: recording the number of infants, creating new kindergartens, providing for suitable building infrastructure and logistical equipment, appointing sufficient number of kindergarten teachers (Doliopoulou, 2008) and it had not prepared for it properly. Very soon, problems started to show.

As a result, six months after the adoption of Law 3518/2006, Law 3577/ 8.6.2007 was passed (Official Gazette no. 130, vol. A), which enabled (article 32) kindergarten

departments to operate in nurseries and day care centres, with strictly kindergarten teachers as their teaching personnel and with the implementation of public kindergartens' official programme (calendar programme, timetable and curriculum). These provisions have been intensely criticized by educators, who considered that in that way public education was being assigned to the private sector and local government organizations (Liatsou, 2009; Kalimeri, 2009). Another circular provided for strict building requirements that the aforementioned departments should have in order to be awarded the necessary license for their operation.

Nevertheless, these provisions did not secure the desired number of kindergartens because many private and municipal kindergartens did not meet the necessary building requirements for the operation license or considered it would not be profitable to create kindergarten departments. At the same time, public kindergartens avoided to enrol preschool children so that their openings would suffice for infants (as shown in the figures published by the Ministry of Education, which present a decrease in the attendance of preschool children and a corresponding increase in the attendance of infants in public kindergartens in the period 2006-2009 – Hellenic Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs 2009). The enrolment of all children 5-6 years old in public kindergartens was not achieved in many regions. This situation led many parents to send their infants to private kindergartens in order to obtain a Certificate of Attendance, and at the same time, many preschool children were enrolled either in private kindergartens or private day care centres due to the lack of openings in public kindergartens (Doliopoulou, 2008). As a result, according to data from the Ministry of Education, the number of infants and preschool children attending private kindergartens rose from 5,342 children in the school year 2007-2008, to 10,525 children in the school year 2008-2009 (Hellenic Ministry of National Education & Religious Affairs 2009).

In an effort to address the problem and meet the demand for more openings for infants and preschool children, the Hellenic Ministry of National Education & Religious Affairs issued the Ministerial Decision 683/14-4-2009 lifting the requirements it had imposed to nurseries and day care centres for acquiring an operation license of kindergarten departments. And because there were infants who did not have a Certificate

of Attendance, the Ministry issued the Circular Φ.6/110/50654/G1/6-5-2009 in May 2009, which allowed "*exceptionally and only for the school year 2009-2010*" the enrolment in elementary school of children who lacked the relevant Certificate. Finally, in October 2009, two days prior to the parliamentary elections, the Ministry of Education issued a new circular allowing infants attending nurseries that had not acquired an operation license by the Ministry of Education, to enrol in the first grade of elementary school during the school year 2010-2011, without the necessary Certificate of Attendance in Kindergarten. The circular was considered a major concession on the part of the government to kindergarten departments of mainly private kindergartens that had not been licensed by the Ministry of Education (Liatsou, 2009; Kalimeri, 2009). In December 2009, the new Deputy Minister of Education Mrs. E. Christophilopoulou, during a meeting with representatives of the DOE, announced that the Ministry would revoke the circular in question, which was opposed to Article 27 of Law 3687/2008, which states that a Certificate of Attendance in Kindergarten is required in order for children to enrol in the first grade of primary school. However, she added that, in order not to upset the children and their families, this provision would not take effect in the current school year, but starting from the school year of 2011-2012, the Certificate of Attendance in Kindergarten will be required for enrolment to primary school. During the same meeting, the Deputy Minister pointed out that the Ministry aims for the promotion of a two-year preschool education for all children aged 4-6, but that it will not proceed with the institution of the two-year mandatory attendance without making sure first that all necessary infrastructure is completed (Var. 2009; Kathimerini, 2009; Avgi, 2009). Therefore, based on the circular Φ.6/249/56404/G1/17-5-2010 of the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning & Religious Affairs, the Certificate of Attendance in Kindergarten is not required in order to enrol students in elementary school for the school year 2010-2011. But in order for the Ministry to record the number of children who did not attend kindergartens (public or private), kindergarten principals will issue a certificate of attendance to infants who attend licensed public or private kindergartens and then, the principals of elementary schools will record the number of the two "types" of pupils.

It is therefore obvious that the institution of compulsory attendance in Greek kindergarten has not been thoroughly planned by the state:

- The views of social partners (parents, kindergarten teachers) on this issue, particularly on important aspects (e.g. timetable) were neither investigated nor taken into account. Collaboration between the state and social partners is a critical issue at this point of view.
- No prior research was conducted on how children's cognitive, social-emotional development and academic achievements is affected by their attendance in kindergarten or lack thereof, by the duration of studies (1 or 2 years as infants and preschoolers) and by the type of kindergarten (all-day or standard type) they attend. The positive results of research conducted abroad regard other types of societies with different educational systems, different education providers, different curricula and different social and educational components (Zambeta. 2004; Kyprianos, 2007) and these conditions must be taken into account. This aspect, combined with the lack of a strong foundation of longitudinal studies in Greece, eliminates any possibility of sufficient scientific documentation of the changes that are taking place in early childhood education.
- Building infrastructure and logistical capabilities and shortcomings of kindergartens were neither recorded nor relevant records were taken into account (Koulaidis. 2006), in order to validly decide if the already operating kindergartens could "support" the mandatory aspect of their operation.
- Studies conducted on the institution of all-day kindergartens in Greece, which referred to their problems and the need for improvement of their infrastructure were not evaluated (Patiniotis, 2005).
- There was no record made of the number of preschoolers and of the existing infrastructure to determine whether these were sufficient for the implementation of mandatory attendance in kindergarten. In practice, it was discovered that there were more places available in kindergarten schools in rural areas, whereas there was an acute problem faced by children in urban areas, especially in Athens, where the ratio of pupils per teacher at kindergarten is much higher (Koulaidis, 2006). Thus, the provision of the introduction of compulsory schooling in kindergarten by stages and by areas (Law 1566/1985) was set aside, whereas it could have been implemented with particular caution.

- Issues arising from the limited timetable of the daily operation of standard kindergartens (08:00 to 12:30) were not addressed, although it does not help working parents as far as the arrival and departure of their children are concerned, as well as the supervision of the children after leaving the school. Given the limited number of all-day kindergartens as well as the limited number of openings, parents are generally forced to turn to private kindergartens that operate in an extended timetable.

In view of the above, the introduction of compulsory schooling in kindergarten in Greece should have taken place in two stages:

- Stage A: Expansion of all-day kindergartens – Improvement of the quality of preschool education. All-day kindergartens constitute more than 50% of kindergartens in the country (Koulaidis, 2006). An effort should be made to expand them and therefore substitute entirely the standard type of kindergarten. All-day kindergartens contribute more to children's development (Fromberg, 1995; Patiniotis, 2005; Doliopoulou, 2000; Koutsouvanou & Chrysafidis, 2000) and respond much more to modern family needs as affected by the professional obligations of parents. Besides it is obvious that the initial levels of the education system will gradually assume even more roles of the family (Zambeta, 2004; European Commission, 1995; Eurydice, 1994, 2009b). Gradually, all kindergartens should be converted to all-day kindergartens (according to Law 2525/1997), provided, of course, that the conditions of their operation are ensured. The improvement of the building infrastructure and the logistical upgrading of kindergartens is necessary so that compulsory attendance can be realized in decent places, namely in places where the child (and their parents) will be mostly happy and less obliged to attend. The majority of kindergartens are located in unsuitable buildings for this education level (from rented shops and houses to school halls), which are not consistent with the characteristics and practices of the educational process at kindergarten. These problems have been identified and are considered as the main problem of the expansion of all-day kindergartens and the generalized

mandatory schooling (Koulaidis, 2006; Patiniotis, 2005; Doliopoulou et al., 2010). Thus, it is common for children to sit at the same table in order to paint or write, to have their breakfast, to play with clay or plasticine, and then to have their meals. In the same room that is filled with smells of tempera, plasticine and food, children have to unfold sofas or lay mattresses and take off their shoes in order to rest at noon.

- Stage B: Institution of compulsory attendance at kindergarten. - Improvement of the quality of preschool education. After the state implements what is mentioned in Stage A and ensured sufficient places for all infants and preschoolers in public kindergartens by creating new kindergarten schools and appointing additional kindergarten teachers (so that the quality of education is ensured - Phillips, et al. 2000; Doliopoulou, 2008; Pyrgiotakis, 2001), then it could proceed with the institution of mandatory preschool education. The effort to upgrade buildings - equipment, services, education and teacher training, to modernise curricula, assess the quality of education provided to children, to record and analyse data on all these aspects (OECD, 2001) should be constant and intense, because the changes and the demands of society and citizens are also constant and intense (Sylva et al., 2004).

Unfortunately, the Greek state adopted the institution of compulsory preschool education without any specific programming, which resulted in the aforementioned problems. However, this institution (despite of its distorted course so far) can be beneficial to young children and Greek society in general:

- It has already led to an increase in the number of children who attend public and private kindergartens: from 141.654 in the school year 2004-2005, 142.982 in 2005-2006 and 143.095 in 2006-2007, this number rose to 149.112 children in 2007-2008 (first school year of the institution of the compulsory aspect of the law) and 157.637 children in 2008-2009 (Hellenic Ministry of National Education & Religious Affairs 2009). Given the relatively low birth rate of the country and the constantly shrinking size of student population, it is evident that the increase in the number of kindergarten students is due to the children who remained at home or

under the supervision of relatives or paid childminders (whose offer to children remains of questionable value) or were attending day care programmes that were incompatible with their age. The number of children attending kindergartens may rise further in the future, but not excessively, given the low birth rate.

- Based on studies that were carried out abroad, it is expected a further increase in the number of children attending kindergartens, who come from families of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which usually do not send their children to preschool care and education (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Similarly, it is expected that an increase in the number of immigrant children, who are starting to enter our educational system by enrolling in primary school, will be registered (Koulaidis, 2006). Their attendance in kindergarten will help even more their social integration and the cultivation of the Greek language, preventing or lowering relative difficulties they face in elementary school (Charity, Scarborough & Griffin 2004; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005).
- One of the positive results of the institution of compulsory attendance in kindergartens will surely be the enhancement of the importance of kindergarten and of the status of kindergarten teachers (Kakana, 2003; Doliopoulou et al., 2010), as it will positively influence the image of kindergarten in the eyes of society but will also boost the self-esteem of kindergarten teachers.

I recommend that the state should:

- instruct specialists to carry out longitudinal research on the benefits of attendance in Greek kindergarten;
- proceed with an initial assessment of the institution of its compulsory aspect, as viewed by parents and kindergarten teachers. Such an investigation will result in the drawing of useful conclusions about the views of those directly involved, the effect it has on kindergarten work, negative and positive results and the emerging need for improvement (Doliopoulou et al., 2010).

- inform parents and kindergarten teachers about the importance of compulsory attendance and about the limits of its effect on the educational process of kindergarten, so as to avoid the deviation of kindergarten to regular schooling;
- increase spending on preschool education (establishment of kindergartens, logistical infrastructure, appointment of kindergarten teachers), as the responsibilities of the state become greater given that kindergartens belong to compulsory education provided free of charge by the state.

From what I have already discussed in this article, the impression created is that mandatory preschool education has experienced a four-year odyssey in our country. If the State can correct the oversights and shortcomings with proper planning and thought-out steps and improve preschool education, then the compulsory aspect of kindergarten will serve as a starting point for the organic integration of preschool education into mandatory education, a process that requires great care, as it has already been pointed out (Xochellis, 1993).

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