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The Capability Approach and Early Childhood Education Curricula

An Investigation into Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Introduction

Early childhood education and care has come to the forefront of social policies in the past decades due to the increasing interest of scientists, policymakers, politicians, and economists. Strengthening early childhood education and care are regarded not only as approaches that help reconcile work and family life, but also promote the socio-economic integration of vulnerable groups in society. A short look at the results of well-known intervention studies with cost-benefit analyses such as the "Chicago Child–Parent Centres" (Reynolds, 1997), "High Scope Perry Preschool Program" (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), or "Carolina Abecedarian Projects" (Campbell et al, 2002) leave no room for doubt regarding the positive long-term effects of preschool programs on children's cognitive and social development – especially for those living in poverty or at risk. The rationale behind public investment in such programmes is the expectation of a demonstrable and calculable return in the form of student performance, a quasi-contract in which preschools receive funding in exchange for delivering specified outcomes (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Influential international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank were also involved in public and academic discussions. Consequently, early childhood education and care programmes have grown more academically demanding over the last 20 years. As a bridge between the home and the school, early childhood education and care have come to be seen as serving a number of critical functions in chlidhood development, including preparation for academic learning, remediation for the effects of poverty, socialization, and academic training in itself.

The educational reports issued by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) have had a significant impact on policy measures for early childhood education and care in the European Union. At the Barcelona summit in 2002, EU member states adopted targets to provide childcare to at least 90 percent of children aged between 3 years and the nation's mandatory school age, as well as to at least 33 percent of children under the age of 3 years by 2010. Among the various EU benchmarks for 2020 that have been set for education, the goal is to have at least 95 percent of children (from the age of 4 to compulsory school age) participate in early childhood education. Ensuring suitable childcare arrangements is seen as an essential policy provision as an essential step towards achieving equal opportunities for women and men in the workplace, and accordingly, is explicitly included in the European Employment Strategy. In 2006, the issue of high-quality education became one of the

predominant strategic objectives in the broader socio-political landscape of the European Union: "Pre-primary education has the highest returns in terms of the social adaptation of children. Member states should invest more in pre-primary education as an effective means to establish the basis for further learning, preventing school drop-out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels" (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009).

As a member of the European Union, this broader sequence of transnational policy decisions had an impact on early childhood education in Greece. Among the multiple changes that have been occurred in the field of early childhood education and care in Greece, including the curriculum reform of 2001, have been the subject of considerable attention. The curriculum has been criticised as leading to the so-called 'schoolification' of pre-primary school by placing greater weight on performance-based academic objectives (Chrysafidis, 2006; Dolio-poulou, 2002, 2003), rather than on capabilities objectives, which focus on the intrinsic value of children's abilities. Schoolification is defined as the move to shift primary school academic activities into pre-primary programs, which tends to makepre-primary school a kind of preparatory stage for children's success in primary school. Indeed, this trend of 'schoolifying' pre-primary education is stated clearly (Fragkos, 2002; Sofou, 2010; Tsafos & Sofou, 2010). The establishment of the all-day pre-primary school aiming at the upgrading of pre-primary education as well as the full preparation of children for primary school has been a government law (l. 2525) in Greece since 1997. Accordingly, aspects such as play-oriented experiences, social recognition, and socio-emotional growth have been ascribed less importance.

Evidence suggests, however, that the official curriculum may only be loosely connected to what teachers actually teach in the classroom (Cohen et al., 1990, cited in Lee Stevenson & Baker, 1991). According to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), although regulatory frameworks – such as standards, curricula, or guidelines – provide external norms that may be reinforced through processes of inspection, practitioners also create their own internal norms, and these are indeed more important in determining their implementation. It is worth mentioning here that within the Greek landscape of policy reform, those actually implementing the reforms in the classroom were the "bit players"[1] in the overall design and planning procedures.

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1   A bit player is a role in which there is direct interaction with the principal actors and no more than five lines of dialogue.

The lack of research-based evidence and assessment process on the pre-primary curriculum that has been implemented thus far is what led me to examine pre-primary teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the actual curriculum approach dictated by current educational policy. I used the broad early childhood curricular approaches that have been identified within the literature on the subject as a theoretical background, namely, the social pedagogic (capabilities-based) and the pre-primary (performance-based) one. The aim of this study was to extend knowledge on how teachers' beliefs and their practises relate to the two sorts of curricular approach being followed in early childhood education. Antecedent personal and contextual factors (years of experience, administrative control, decision latitude, self-efficacy) were included in the model in order to gain a better understanding of the social structures that restrict teachers' freedom of agency. Within this framework, I investigated the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their respective practises, and the preference for a specific sort of belief that teachers may favour. Furthermore, I explored the potential of the Capability Approach as a normative framework that can shape a curriculum that goes above and beyond academic content alone.

Policymakers increasingly recognize that schools can be no better than the teachers and administrators who work in them (Guskey, 2002). Teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and decisions on educational matters make up a substantial and significant part of the teaching process, as a teacher's beliefs usually influence the actual instruction the teacher provides to students (Kagan, 1992). Beliefs, which are based on personal experiences, value systems and philosophies, have a direct impact on all aspects of human behavior, and individuals create a belief system for each major issue that concerns them. Beliefs need not be founded upon scientifically valid data – and rarely are. Most beliefs are related to deep-rooted, internalalized representations. Given this reality, it can be argued that teachers' beliefs shape the information received from formal teachers preparation and directly affect their classroom practices.

Over the past 25 years, researchers have shown increasing interest in studying teachers' beliefs and how these beliefs relate to teaching and learning practices (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992) According to Fullan (1989), mastering practices and beliefs is the key to a pre-primary teacher's success. If effective use of the structure materials such as the curriculum is not achieved, particularly due to the beliefs and practices of front-line implementers, outcomes will not be achieved.

Although there has been global research conducted on early childhood teachers' beliefs, this work is mainly linked to examining the National Association for

the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) guidelines (1991) regarding what are considered to be developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and developmentally inappropriate practices (DIP) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

ECEC services are largely depicted as local sites of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), characterized by the presence of regulatory controls that seemingly leading to normalized and privileged technical practices undertaken by disempowered early childhood teachers, who are burdened by the increasing regulatory accountabilities. Some critics (example.g. Grieshaber, 2002; Duncan, 2004) have suggested that under the weight of such regulatory accountabilities – along with the sanctions and enticements these regulations entail – early childhood teachers can become "docile yet productive" (Grieschaber, 2002, p. 162). Up until this point, there is a paucity of empirical research in Greece in the area of pre-primary teachers' beliefs. Furthermore, the issue of which aspects of the curriculum are endorsed and implemented by teachers has not been addressed.

This study uses the concept of the Capability Approach (CA), pioneered by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and further developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, as an alternative critical lens through which to examine early childhood curricula. The CA is a broad normative framework for evaluating individual well being and social arrangements, policy design, and proposals regarding social change in society (Robeyns, 2003). The CA aims to assess the relative quality of human lives and societies by posing the question of "what are people actually able to do and to be?" (Nussbaum, 2011). As such, the framework provided by the CA serves as a counter narrative to the narrow instrumentalism that reduces education to a mere process of acquiring academic skills to be used in the workplace.

Focusing on the case of Greece, the central finding of the book is that the pedagogue's capability and responsibility to engage in curriculum development is a prerequisite for efficient early childhood pedagogy. Becoming involved in the process enables a sympbosis between the pedagogues' beliefs, their practical experience and their theoretical knowledge. Together, this ensures the representation of a variety of diverse viewpoints when it comes to defining what foundational based of knowledge is essential, and defining what skills are necessary for the highly unpredictable future. I believe that the issues discussed here are unlikely to be confined to this country alone and will have resonances on other national or international contexts.

Chapter 1 introduces the early childhood education in Greece and defines the critical vocabulary for the reader. A literature review of related fields and concepts is outlined in Chapter 2, which describes the current state of early childhood

education and care from an international perspective as well as within the Greek context. Chapter 2 also presents the curriculum of 2001, its criticisms, and the debate that it has since generated. This chapter also presents the theoretical context and research conducted on teachers' beliefs and practices, attempting to embed the present research within a wider theoretical framework and to pinpoint its contribution to this field of research. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the literature on the CA. Chapter 3 sums up the research problems identified in the literature review and presents research questions and hypotheses. It also introduces the research model constructs and research aims of this study. Chapter 4 develops the research methodology and delineates the research design, the instrument's development, population sample, the data collection process, and the tools used in the empirical investigation. Chapter 5 reports the research findings and explains the results of mean comparisons, correlation analyses, confirmatory factor analyses, and structural equation modelling. The discussion that follows in Chapter 6 bridges the gap between theoretical considerations and the evidence gleaned from research.