

A comparison of the National Preschool curricula in Greece and Iceland¹

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ABSTRACT

Iceland and Greece are geographically and culturally two contrasting countries. In Iceland emphasis is placed on the social welfare model and the social pedagogical perspective in early childhood education is respected and practiced. In view of the relative weakness of Greek economic development and civil society, the Greek centralist state has always played a dominant role in education in general and particularly in preschool education. It is expected that these social and cultural differences are mirrored in the preschool curricula of the two countries. In this paper the National curriculum guidelines of both countries were compared. Content analysis was applied to compare cultural values and pedagogical objectives in these documents. It was found that the Icelandic National Curriculum Guidelines (2003) puts the emphasis on play and on the development of "life skills", whereas in the National Greek Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework (2003) cognitive approach is predominant.

Introduction

Iceland and Greece are geographically, culturally, and historically two highly contrasting countries of the Northern and Southern periphery of Europe. Iceland is one of the Nordic countries where the social welfare model is dominant and where the social pedagogical perspective in early childhood education

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prevails. Greece, on the other hand, belongs to the countries of the Southern periphery of Europe and is, concerning its economic development, a late comer, a late comer with an only rudimentary developed welfare state.

Research indicates that in a globalized world the preschool curricula of most countries emphasize to a large extent the same general objectives (Laevers 2005, Bennett 2005, Oberhuemer 2005), which are pronounced by international organizations such as OECD and UNESCO. Thus, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child is accepted by National Ministries of Education of countries with otherwise very different educational policies. However, our understanding of children, childhood, learning, and development are also dependent on historical, cultural, geographical, economic and political contexts (Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989, Alexander 2000). “These ‘cultural scripts’ (Rosenthal 2003) also pervade our understanding of early childhood services as a public good and our images of those who work with young children” (Oberhuemer 2008: 52). Since institutions, practices and behavioral patterns are always elements of a given society and, thus, parts of a coherent whole, they can only be understood in the specific context, in which they function (Rogoff 2003: 11).

The comparative perspective of the present study allows us to understand how the general targets stressed in the dominant curriculum discourse are articulated with the national curriculum policies and how they are adapted to the specific context of each country.

The Social and Cultural Context of Preschool² in Greece and Iceland

Culture is a system of general normative principles, i.e. values governing action such as universalism, equality, democracy, emancipation and freedom, which are institutionalized in social systems. Through their internalization by the individuals in the course of the socialization process, these principles ensure the reproduction and the stability of the social system through the transmission of the previous achievements of civilization from one generation to the next. “Thus the more general cultural patterns provide action systems with a highly stable structural anchorage quite analogous to that provided by the genetic materials of the species-type, focusing on the learned elements of action just as the genes focus upon the inheritable elements” (Parsons 1966: 6). As Karl Deutsch puts

2. In the present study the same term “Preschool” is used for ECEC institutions in both countries, although these institutions accept children in different age. In Iceland the children are between 1-5 years old, whereas in Greece they are only between 4-6 years old.

it, "If we look still more deeply into each configuration of culture... we find... behind the visible configuration of accepted things and accepted behavior, an invisible configuration of values, of do's and don'ts, of rules of discriminating between actions as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, familiar or strange, safe or dangerous, interesting or indifferent." (Deutsch 1978: 88)

Since every society has a vital interest to preserve its identity in the long run, it organizes the school and preschool curriculum in view of this general objective by including in it all the normative and instrumental elements, which characterize the identity of the society and whose transmission to the next generation is considered as crucial for the continuation of the society in the time (Parsons 1966). Given this systemic goal, the curriculum is the strategically important element in the process of reproduction of societies, which contains their cultural "codes" or "seeds."

Hence, education, which prepares children and young adults to become active members of their society, is fulfilling this task by transmitting to the youth those values, norms, knowledge and skills, whose mastery is required for their successful socialization into the roles, positions and social settings. Assuming from this point of view that the culture and the values of a society are expressed in the school and preschool curriculum, it is expected that the national differences will be mirrored in the preschool curricula of the two countries. On the basis of this general assumption, it is expected that Greece and Iceland, because of their dissimilarities, will exhibit correspondingly marked differences in their preschool curricula.

Iceland, being a Nordic country, shares with the other four countries the religious tradition of Protestantism and is influenced by the relevant secular consequences of this tradition, such as the early development of literacy and the "Protestant working ethos" (Weber 1969). Iceland is also sharing with the other Nordic countries the long democratic tradition and the gradualist political development with relatively little mass violence. Iceland was until the first part of the 20th century a poor country, but it experienced a rapid economic take off since the end of World War II, similar in this respect to Finland. Because of Iceland's geographic position in the North Atlantic Ocean halfway between Europe and America it received cultural influences from both sides, while remaining fundamentally Nordic in many respects (Einarsdóttir 2006: 161).

The political culture of Iceland shares many elements characterizing the active political culture of civil society (Dahlberg et al 1999:70-82) of the other Nordic countries, with which Iceland has close relations as a member of the Nordic Council (Nordisk Råd). Hence, the citizens are given strong rights by the constitution and they are encouraged to participate in the political process on all the levels making use of their political and social rights as individuals

or as part of a group. Correspondingly, there is a high degree of acceptance of the political regime on the part of the citizens and an absence of strong radical movements challenging the political system.

Greece, in contrast, being Christian-Orthodox has developed very differently since the beginning of the modern European history. The consequences of the four hundred years lasting Ottoman occupation (1453-1830) for Greece and the Balkans were mass illiteracy and economic, technological, and political backwardness in comparison with the West. At the time when Greece became independent after a national revolution (1821-1827), the percentage of illiterates in the population was according to estimations about 85% (Cipolla 1969). Because of this high rate of illiterates, the early introduction of the universal male suffrage (1844) in Greece was politically counterproductive and was not conducive to the development of a participatory civic culture, but instead to a system of clientelism and patronage, which permeated deeply the political and social system of Greece up to the present (Petropoulos 1968, Mouzelis 1978, Legg & Roberts 1997). Hence, in the absence of a strong civil society and of an active stratum of entrepreneurs, the state took over many of the functions of society (Zambeta 2002), as it typically happens in most less developed societies today. Under these conditions of state dominance over the society, an authoritarian “etatism” emerged, which was modeled after the French “etatist” tradition but was less efficient and has led to economic and political immobilism. The Greek state has often ignored citizen rights and has impeded the development of a participatory political culture.

These above mentioned general facts concerning society and polity are highly relevant for education too since, as comparative educationists like Michael Sadler have observed a long time ago, what happens outside the school is often more important than what happens inside the school (Sadler 1964, in: Cowen 2009:339).

The Context of the Greek Preschool Curriculum

Unlike the inception of preschools in other industrialized European countries, the institution of preschool in Greece was initially not motivated by the necessity to take care of children of working mothers, but by reasons of language and national education in the context of state building in Greece. Hence, in Greece the preschool was not an institution of care for children but it had to promote Greek language and culture. The preservation and propagation of Greek language especially in the border areas of the state constituted the main factor for

the establishment of preschools (Kyriazopoulou-Valinaki, 1977: 234; Charitos 1996:216-217; Kyprianos 2007: 144). In Greece, which has never been an industrialized country, the founding and expansion of preschool network took place from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. Since the foundation of the New Greek state in the early 19th century, preschool as well as primary school are both defined as educational institutions under the supervision and control of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. Thus the preschool was at the outset integrated into the educational system tightly connected to primary school. The Law 1566/1985 determines all the regulations concerning the structure and the operation of primary and secondary education. The same law stipulates that preschool education (children 4-6 years old) belongs to primary education (children 6-12 years old) and a great part of its operation follows the same legislative regulations that are in force for primary school. Since September 2007 preschool education is compulsory for all 5 year olds, this means compulsory preschool education one year before entrance in school (Oberhuemer, Schreyer and Neuman 2010).

Greece has since 1962 a National preschool curriculum, which – in contradiction to other countries like Denmark (Jensen and Langsted 2004) – is uncontroversial. In 2003, a new preschool curriculum was enacted replacing the previous one of 1989, the Preschool Curriculum Framework is part of the National Curriculum Framework (Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework, henceforth CTCF) for all grades and subjects areas of the compulsory education. The 36-page long national preschool curriculum document puts emphasis on the social-constructivist concept of learning and stresses the experiential nature of learning, children's individual development and needs, children's active participation, team work, the importance of the learning environment and play and the project work and teacher's facilitator role. However, despite its claims to integrated learning, preschool curriculum focuses on distinct subject-learning areas, Language, Mathematics, Environment Studies, Creation and Expression and Computer Science, "with particularly strong emphasis on cognitive development and a considerable number of goals (over one hundred goals)" (Sofou and Tsafos 2010: 413)

The curriculum is accompanied by a 431 page-long book "The Preschool Teacher's Guide" (Dafermou et al 2006), which was published three years after the curriculum document and which is not analyzed in the present study. This document contains theoretical and methodological support, including the basic theoretical principles that show how the learning-teaching process is perceived from the point of view of the revisited curriculum. In addition, it contains to a large part guidelines concerning the five subject-learning areas described above and also good practice examples.

The Context of the Icelandic Preschool Curriculum

Whereas in Greece, as already mentioned, the preschool was founded in the mid-19th century mainly because of national and linguistic reasons, in order to promote national identity, in Iceland the main reason was the need for out-of-home care, which emerged in the beginning of urbanization in the 1920s. For about 30 years the care and education of children prior to compulsory school was viewed as social policy geared especially toward poor children. In 1973 the daycare centers and the playschools were integrated under the Ministry of Education. This important shift in educational policy came in the wake of new views about children and childhood. Many of these new views were at odds with the traditional Icelandic views about children and childhood and this has split the preschool teachers concerning the role of preschool education; The conventional Icelandic view that children should be independent and free to play and explore the environment was criticized by those who argue that children need today closer supervision and /or earlier academic instruction (Einarsdóttir 2006: 161). Since 1991 the term playschool has been used for all early education programs for children up to 6 years old prior to the age of compulsory education. In 1994 playschool education became by law the first level of schooling, although it was neither compulsory nor free of charge.

The Ministry of Education formulates an education policy for the preschools and publishes the Preschool National Curriculum Guidelines. Based on the broad guidelines in the curriculum each preschool develops its own educational plan.

It is meant to provide a flexible framework, not specific content, for preschools throughout Iceland. According to the curriculum play is the foundation for children's learning and development. The curriculum stresses the importance of life skills, which encompass social competencies.

Table 1
An Overview of the Two National Curricula

CURRICULUM	Greek	Icelandic
Introduction of a National Curriculum	National curriculum since the beginning. Officially since 1962 In the present version since 2003.	National curriculum since 1986 In the present version since 2003
Authority	Ministry of Education, since 1929	Ministry of Education since 1973
Age group covered	4-6	1-5
Continuity with the curriculum of the primary school	The CTCFP is part of the comprehensive curriculum for the three levels, which is centrally administrated. This means that the National Curriculum starts from the Preschool and comprises the other two levels up to the end of compulsory education.	The NCGP is not part of a comprehensive curriculum but it includes a chapter concerning the cooperation between preschool and compulsory school
Content	The content of the curriculum is organized in five “subject –learning areas”.	The content of the curriculum is organized in six “Learning areas”
Evaluation of Preschool work	Self evaluation	Self evaluation and external evaluation
Total number of words of the curricular document	16.427 words (36 pages)	11.643 words (47 pages)

Table 1 demonstrates schematically the main differences and similarities of the two Curricula. Although both curricula are today National curricula, the original Greek preschool plan was unofficially since the beginning a “National preschool plan” and became so officially since 1962, whereas in Iceland the curriculum became a National Curriculum in 1973. Another relevant difference is that the Greek preschools came under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in 1929, whereas in Iceland until 1973 they were under the responsi-

bility of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Now, in both countries the responsibility belongs to the Ministry of Education, but their traditions are nevertheless very different. Whereas the present day Icelandic curriculum emerged from the social pedagogy tradition of the Nordic countries, the Greek curricular tradition has its roots in the continental pre-primary approach (OECD 2006:135-145). The age of the children covered by the curriculum is 4-6 in Greece and 1-5 in Iceland. The Greek curriculum is organized along one dimension containing five subject areas which have an academic orientation, whereas the Icelandic is organized along two dimensions, i.e. “Development” and “Learning” trying thus to keep a balance between the cognitive approach and its social pedagogy tradition. However, also in Iceland “politicians place growing demands on preschool to include more academic subjects” (Einarsdóttir 2006: 160-161) into the preschool curriculum. Another study focused on the comparison of the preschool curricula of Norway and Sweden by Alvestad & Pramling Samuelson has concluded that “there is a shift towards more academically oriented preschools in both countries”.

Method of Analysis

The present study examines the Greek Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for Preschool and the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools guided by the following three research questions: 1) What views of children and childhood are presented in the preschool curricula of the two countries? 2) How is the role of the preschool teacher described in the preschool curricula of the two countries? 3) How is cooperation with parents described in the preschool curricula of the two countries?

To answer these three questions content analysis was applied to compare pedagogical objectives which follow from different cultural values of the two societies which are manifested in the different contents of the three main concepts “Child” “Preschool teacher” and “Parents” designating the main actors in the two curricula. The frequency of appearance of each of these three concepts was analyzed in relation to meaningful contexts, in which they appear in connection with certain categories designating relevant situations. For example the concept “Child” appears in connection with the categories “play”, “knowledge-learning”, “child’s development”, “creativity-expression” (Table 2). The other two main concepts “Preschool teacher” and “Parents” appear with different categories (Table 3 and 4). To give another example, the total frequency with which the term “teacher” appeared in the Greek document is

54 times and in the Icelandic document 39 times, then it was found that the term appeared 2 times in connection with the category “parents” in the Greek document and 11 times in connection with the same category in the Icelandic document and similarly with the other categories (see Table 3). In this way, not only the quantitative frequency of a concept is measured, but also the specific relations to actors and situations were taken into account (Holsti 1969, Berelson 1984, Neuendorf 2002).

Concerning the comparison of the absolute frequency of the terms in the two Curricula, it must be taken into consideration that the two documents are not of equal length. The Greek text contains 16.427 words and the Icelandic text 11.643. Their ratio is thus: $16.427/11.643 = 1,4/1$. Hence, if the ratio of the frequencies of a term in the two documents is equal or close to 1,4/1, then there is no difference between the two Curricula concerning the frequency of the use of the respective term. A greater value of the ratio will indicate an “overrepresentation” of the term in the Greek document in relation to the Icelandic document, whereas a smaller value will indicate an “underrepresentation” of the term in the Greek in relation to the Icelandic document. Evidently, in the latter case, the term would have greater quantitative weight in the Icelandic curriculum.

Findings

Analysis of the two documents indicates elements pointing to the general pedagogical aim of the all-round development of the child. The importance of the family and of the peer-group is also appreciated in both documents. There are, however, some differences in the assessment of the function of the preschool, which in the Greek documents appears rather as a transitory stage leading to the next stage, whereas in the Icelandic document it is rather considered as having its own developmental function and meaning to the child. At least this seems possibly to be the meaning of the passage: “...seek to support them mentally and physically in order that they may enjoy their childhood” (italics from the authors NCGP 2003, p. 7)

Both documents emphasize thematic areas and subjects for the intellectual, linguistic, social, aesthetic and moral development of the child. Despite the fact that in both curricula “play” is mentioned as an important element in the socialization process, it appears, if one reads between the lines, that play has a more important pedagogical function as the “main pedagogical means to learning and development” in the Icelandic curriculum than in the Greek. Also, the areas are called “subjects” in Greek Curriculum and “learning areas”

and “developmental aspects” in the Icelandic curriculum. Here, the words are not so “innocent,” because the logic of “subjects” is the logic of scientific disciplines, whereas the meaning of the term “developmental aspects” points towards and is focused on the developmental needs of the child.

What views of children and childhood are presented in the preschool curricula of the two countries?

Table 2

The view of the child, as it emerges in the preschool curricula of Greece and Iceland on the basis of the frequencies and the contexts of appearance of the term in the documents

CATEGORIES	FREQUENCIES and EXAMPLES OF STATEMENTS IN WHICH THE TERM “CHILD ” APPEARS CORRESPONDING TO THE CATEGORIES IN THE TWO CURRICULA		
	Icelandic curriculum (11.643 words)	Greek curriculum (16.427 words)	Ratio: GR / ICE
Play	97 “Although children need to play on their own terms, the preschool teacher should not remain passive” p.16	62 “The children learn in the play to co-operate, to take responsibilities and roles, and to follow and respect rules.” p. 589	0,6
Knowledge-Learning	42 “..provide children with the opportunity to participate in work and play, and to enjoy varied learning opportunities..” p. 7	72 “The children, in a secure and rich in stimulations environment, explore with their senses, create ideas and construct knowledge.” p. 586	1,7
Child’s Development	42 “..emphasize, in co-operation with their families, children’s all-round development..” p. 7	36 “The Preschool as an institution of socialization (after the family) must ensure the conditions for the normal development and socialization of the children..” p.586	0,9

The term “child” appears 339 times altogether in the Icelandic curriculum and 251 times altogether in the Greek curriculum. In Table 2 these total numbers of appearance in the documents are not presented but only the total numbers of appearance of the term in the specific contexts defined by the four categories (247 and 194 respectively). The remaining cases of appearance (92 and 57) could not be meaningfully assigned to our categories and have been treated as “residual cases”.

From the analysis of the contexts, in which the term “child” appears in the documents, 4 main categories with a relative high frequency emerged, which are useful for the comparison of the documents. These categories and their corresponding frequencies are: “Play” 97 & 62 references respectively, “Knowledge-learning” 42 & 72, “Child’s development” 42 & 36, “Creativity-Expression” 66 & 24.

Given the different length of the curricular texts, i.e. the ratio of the number of words in the documents, which is 1,4, as explained above, the ratio of the frequencies for the term “child” is $251/339 = 0,7$, i.e. it is much smaller than the expected value, if there were no difference between the Curricula. Hence, the fact indicates that the term is used considerably more often in the Icelandic document.

The more distant a particular ratio value from 1,4 is, the more differs the frequency of the respective item in the two Curricula. Starting with the first category, we see that in the Icelandic curriculum, absolutely and relatively, “play” is used much more often than in the Greek curricular text. If we try to interpret this quantitative fact we could say that play occupies a more central place in the pedagogical concept of the Icelandic Preschool than in the Greek. The official declarations of Icelandic Ministry of Education tend to confirm this interpretation: “Preschool subjects are oriented more towards maturity than subject matter, emphasizing children’s play as a route to learning and maturity, discovery learning” (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, National Curriculum. Guide for Preschools 2003: 8). It is recognized in the same document that children need to play on their own terms, and that the preschool has to provide a secure and rich in stimulations environment for indoor as well as for outdoor activities.

Concerning the second category “Knowledge-Learning”, we see, following the same line of argument, that in the Greek curriculum more emphasis is put on the cognitive dimensions of knowledge and learning than it is the case in Iceland. By the remaining two categories “Child’s development” and “Creativity-Expression” we see that their relative frequencies are greater in the Icelandic document. Hence, we conclude that they are more important pedagogical objectives of the Icelandic curriculum than of the Greek.

How is the role of the preschool teacher described in the preschool curricula of the two countries?

Table 3

The role of the preschool teacher, as it emerges in the preschool Curricula of Greece and Iceland on the basis of the frequencies and the contexts of appearance of the term in the documents

CATEGORIES	FREQUENCIES and EXAMPLES OF STATEMENTS IN WHICH THE TERM “TEACHER” APPEARS CORRESPONDING TO THE CATEGORIES IN THE TWO CURRICULA	
	Icelandic curriculum	Greek curriculum
Knowledge, Learning, Information	1 “The teacher should...provide children with the opportunity... to enjoy varied learning opportunities” p. 7	32 E.g. “The teacher should ... stimulate the interest for learning and promote the knowledge..” p. 591
Parents	11 “Parents must provide the preschool teacher with information on the child’s circumstances while themselves learning of the activities of its preschool section.” p. 36	2 “The curriculum should ... reinforce the interaction between the children, the cooperation with the parents..” p. 586
Play and act together with the children	8 “A game often becomes more fun if the preschool teacher joins in” p. 16	5 “The teacher often plays puppet-show for the children” p. 610
Development of motivation	5 “A preschool teacher should follow children’s play and always be prepared to provide stimulation or take part in the play, on the children’s terms in such case. ”p. 16	6 “The teacher takes part in the process, plays roles, motivates the children.”p. 589

CATEGORIES	FREQUENCIES and EXAMPLES OF STATEMENTS IN WHICH THE TERM “TEACHER” APPEARS CORRESPONDING TO THE CATEGORIES IN THE TWO CURRICULA	
	Icelandic curriculum	Greek curriculum
Socio-emotional security	6 “The teacher’s presence gives the children support and security	8 “The teacher organizes attractive learning experiences, which have meaning and interest the children in a spirit of cooperation, encouraging, trust, acceptance, love and division of the work and the roles.” p. 591
Acquaintance of teacher with the child	8 “A preschool teacher becomes acquainted with a child through preschool activities and knows how it is maturing, developing skills and responding in a group environment.” p. 35	1 “The teacher follows systematically the development of the child in the course of the time. Initially, he becomes aware of the experiences, knowledge, the interests of the child.” p. 592
Total	39 references	54 references

As we see from the data presented on Table 3 there are 39 references to the term “teacher” in the Icelandic and 54 in the Greek document. Thus, we arrive at the following conclusions. First, two different teacher role profiles emerge in the two curricula. As expected, in the Greek curriculum the teacher profile is characterized by a heavily cognitive element. In connection with the term “teacher” there are 32 references to the terms “knowledge,” “learning,” and “information” in the Greek curriculum but only one reference to “learning” in the Icelandic curriculum. Second, an important element of the teacher role in the Icelandic curriculum is the structuring of his/her relation and communication with the parents. There are 11 references to the parents in the Icelandic curriculum but only two in the Greek curriculum. Third, playing with the children – not preparing a play for the children – is a further important element of the teacher role in the Icelandic curriculum. True, the play occupies also an important position in the Greek curriculum, but in three out of five references it is mentioned that the teacher should support the play of the children; in one reference the teacher “plays a puppet-show for the children” – not with the children – and in only one reference the teacher actively plays roles with the children. Fourth, the development of motivation and the feel-

ings of socio-emotional stability and trust are considered as important in both curricula. Finally, in the Icelandic curriculum particular emphasis is put on the personal acquaintance of the teacher with the child concerning his/her family background, his/her personal traits, talents, and inclinations. The intensive exchange of information between the teacher and the parents serves particularly this objective. The acquaintance with the details of the individual biography and the personal traits of the child is less pronounced in the Greek curriculum.

How is cooperation with parents described in the preschool curricula of the two countries?

Table 4

The role of the parents, as it emerges in the preschool Curricula of Greece and Iceland on the basis of the frequencies and the contexts of appearance of the term in the documents

CATEGORIES	FREQUENCIES WITH WHICH THE TERM "PARENTS" APPEARS CORRESPONDING TO THE CATEGORIES IN THE TWO CURRICULA	
	Icelandic curriculum	Greek curriculum
1) Cooperation	3	3
2) Mutual exchange of information	8	0
3) Flow of information from teachers to parents	10	1
4) Flow of information from parents to teachers	3	1
5) Primary responsibility of the parents	3	0
6)Active participation of the parents	6	0
7) Introduction of parents to the Preschool	4	0
8) Parents' association	3	0
9) Evaluation	2	1
Total	42 references	6 references

In Table 4 we see that there are 42 references to parents in the Icelandic document and only 6 references in the Greek document, so that their ratio is

0,1. The difference is so large that we can conclude that this quantitative finding reflects a significant difference in the public understanding of the role of the parents in preschool education in Iceland and Greece. From the analysis of the contexts, in which the term appears, nine categories have emerged: 1) Co-operation, 2) mutual exchange of information between teachers and parents, 3) flow of information from the teachers to the parents, 4) flow of information from the parents to the teachers, 5) Primary responsibility of the parents for the education of their children, 6) active participation of the parents, 7) introduction of parents to the preschool by the teacher or the director, 8) Parents' association, 9) evaluation.

In the Icelandic curriculum it is explicitly recognized that the parents bear the primary responsibility for the education of their children and that the "preschool supplements the child's upbringing at the home" (p. 7). From this, it follows that for the preschool to fulfill its task appropriately, it is necessary to establish a close, continuous and systematic cooperation with the parents. To achieve this objective, emphasis is given to the mutual exchange of information between teachers and parents (and not only to the "information of parents by the teachers") and in addition particular emphasis is also put on the active participation of the parents in the life of the preschool. The introduction of the parents to the preschool by the teacher or the director and the existence of the collective body of the parents' association confer a special weight to the role and to the involvement of the parents in the preschool. Finally, co-operation between home and preschool is one among 12 aspects, which must be taken into account by the evaluation (self evaluation and external evaluation) of preschool work (p. 45-47).

Discussion and Conclusion

Given the competing forces of internationalization in education on one side and of the defense of national identities on the other, it was expected that the comparison of the curricula in the two highly heterogeneous countries, Greece and Iceland, would show significant dissimilarities as well as similarities between them. This expectation was generally fulfilled. The diffusion of pedagogical ideas through increasing transnational communication in today's globalized world had among its consequences that the early childhood education curriculum frameworks in most countries include, to a large extent, the same general objectives, aims, and goals. On the other hand, huge cultural and structural differences existing between societies do not simply disappear because bodies of progressive educationists in the service of National Ministries, moti-

vated by the pronouncements of international organizations, formulate similar educational objectives for their countries. Not only educational practices in different societies differ considerably, but there are also relevant dissimilarities in the content of the curricula. “Curricula for early childhood education and care vary not only in scope, objectives and evaluation (Oberhuemer, 2005), but also in methods or perspectives on children and their play and learning” as Pramling Samuelsson et al, (2006:13) mention referring to past research.

More precisely, the analysis of the findings has clearly demonstrated that there are on one side common pedagogical ideals like the emphasis in both curricula on the all-round development of the child and the view of the child as an actor and not as a passive subject waiting to be formed by external educational influences. On the other side, the analysis has also revealed that there is a significant differentiation concerning the emphasis put on educational objectives in the two countries and also in the ways to achieve them. Here some “differences within similarities” have been identified. Although both curricula value highly the development of the individual child, they do make different assessments concerning the means with which this objective can be reached. So, according the Icelandic view of education, on the level of the preschool the play is the central means, which leads “naturally” not only to the personal development of the child but also to its cognitive, emotional, and social learning through the acquisition of life-skills for communication and interaction. In the Greek curriculum, the importance of the play is also recognized but more emphasis is put on the cognitive learning of “subjects.” It seems that according to the Greek view, the preparation of the child for its later integration into the society by an early acquisition of cultural techniques has a higher priority than its individualization, whereas in Iceland, in this very early stage of the socialization of the child, its individualization ranges higher as a value.

Depending on this differential emphasis in the two curricula, also the role of the teacher is seen differently. As our data have clearly demonstrated, pointing on existing large quantitative differences, the Greek curriculum demands from the teacher cognitive competence in subject areas, whereas in the Icelandic curriculum the main desideratum concerning the teacher role is communicative competence. This means that it is expected from him/her to be convincing and successful in the communication with the different partners of his/her complex role-set and especially with the children and their parents. Our data have also shown that the participation of the parents in the educational process is more strongly expected on the part of the preschool in Iceland than in Greece; this is undisputable, given the large quantitative differences emerging from the data. A possible explanation for this fact is that in a developed civil society individuals and families have more rights which are formally and

substantially respected and exercised in practice. Since civil society is more developed in the Nordic countries, generally, parents are given stronger rights in the Icelandic preschool curriculum than in the Greek curriculum.

To conclude, in the present comparative study the relation between the global educational trends with the national context came to the forefront showing the influence which the dominant discourse do exert on the curricula. It appears that the clash of the postmodern dominant discourse with the resistance of the national traditions leads to a balance of many differences between the curricula of the two countries and makes the distinction between the social pedagogy tradition and the readiness for school tradition (OECD 2006) less pronounced on the level of the official documents. However, what really happens in practice is another question, inviting to further research.

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