

Are We Ready for Integrated ECEC Systems? Greek In-Service Early Childhood Educators' Level of Preparation for Implementing Educare¹ Systems

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Abstract

Greece is one of the many countries, which still utilize a split Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. In fact, this dichotomy characterizes not only preschool programs, but also higher education institutions which train pre-service ECEC educators. Recently, Greek government's Organization for ECEC organized an open debate for the adoption of a "Unified National Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care". Although this initiative was greeted enthusiastically by the association of childcare workers, the coordinating body of kindergarten teachers and university departments reacted negatively and openly debated childcare workers' pedagogical competence to assume the educational aspects of integrated ECEC systems. In addition, relevant announcements indicate kindergarten teachers' effort to refuse any connection with care.

In the context of the present study a questionnaire was administered to 233 ECEC professionals representing all professional groups working in the Greek ECEC sector to explore their attitudes about the content and the effectiveness of their training in terms of implementing systems that combine education and care. Results showed that professional groups believe that they are well prepared in most aspects of ECEC theory and practice and revealed significant differences among groups. Further, weaknesses in initial education courses were revealed regarding preparation for implementing integrated ECEC practices.

Research results when interpreted in conjunction with reaction to the public debate suggest that Greece is not ready to implement an integrated ECEC system due to various impediments (political, corporate, discursive etc.) and to the unawareness of what integrated ECEC is.

Keywords

Early childhood education and care, ECEC dichotomy, early childhood education policy, early childhood educators, Educare approach, Greece.

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter referred to as ECEC) can be considered as one of the most fragmented professions since it presents a picture of "inconsistencies, incoherence, parallelisms and discontinuity"

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(Haddad, 2006, p. 3), both in terms of ECEC services and of teacher preparation systems. Central to this heterogeneity are not only ideological and historical reasons (Haddad, 2006; Caldwell, 1989) but also discursive reasons which stem from the “blurring of boundaries between the terms care, development and education” (Macfarlane and Lewis, 2004, p. 51).

As a result, dichotomous ECEC systems dominate around the globe. The dichotomous system is grounded in a policy approach that separates *care* and *education*, a polarization articulated by age range, with younger children being enrolled in services that provide mainly care (*childcare*), and older children attending educational institutions (*pre-primary*), which emphasize preparation for primary school. In such systems there are often different regulatory agencies at national level, divided into ministries; and a formal curriculum normally established only for older children. Qualification requirements for staff differ depending on the type of service and conditions of access may vary greatly, with a legal attendance requirement usually only for older children (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

The same dichotomy also characterizes the training systems of ECEC professionals. In countries with split ECEC systems, there is usually a difference between the qualifications required to work with younger children and those needed to work with older children (OECD, 2012). Those working with older children have a clear educational or pedagogical role, whereas those working with younger children have a caring or paramedical role (Van Laere, Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2012). The picture is becoming even more blurred since various types of professionals may provide education and/or care to preschoolers and “staff performing similar roles may also have different types of job titles” (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, 95).

However, the integrated and holistic approach to ECEC provision and training attracts increasingly more attention and has become a growing trend. In terms of providing ECEC, EU special committees recommend that countries should move towards an integration of

ECEC governance structures and emphasize an integrated approach to education and care, considering children's needs in a holistic way, to ensure and enhance the quality of these structures (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013; European Commission, 2011a; European Commission, 2011b; OECD, 2015). In terms of ECEC professionals' qualifications and training, research results underscore the link between ECEC quality (OECD, 2012; 2015) and teacher qualifications, including staff who can work within a holistic framework, that understand the concepts of *care* and *education* to be interdependent and on equal footing (Peeters et al., 2016).

The present study explores how well the dichotomous training system in Greece has prepared different professional groups working in ECEC programs to provide both education and care for preschool children. To meet this aim, we obtained the perceptions of professional groups working in Greek preschool settings (both kindergarten schools and infant/child centers) on the content and effectiveness of their early years training course. More precisely, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How well prepared are Greek ECEC professionals on various dimensions of ECEC theory and practice?
2. How ECEC professionals' preparedness on various dimensions is affected by professional role?
3. Are there ECEC professional groups that are better prepared to provide care, and others to provide education?
4. To what extend are ECEC professionals prepared to provide ECEC programs that combine education and care?

Research Context: The Case of Greece

In Greece, different agencies are responsible for providing social welfare, free education and child care and “there is no centralized agency designated to provide care and assistance and to supervise the various services provided by the State” (Law Library of Congress, September, 2007, p. 97). Figure 1 presents the structure of the Greek ECEC system as well as the dichotomy in terms of ECEC professionals' initial training.

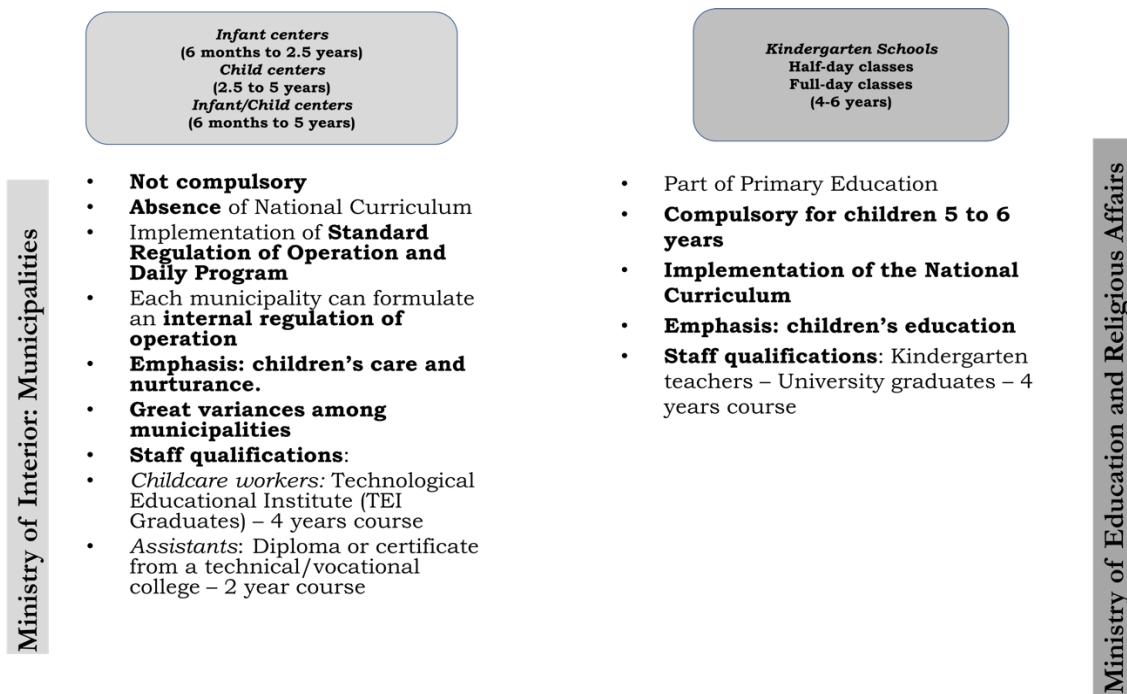


Figure 1. Organization of ECEC in Greece

In terms of dichotomy in the Greek training system we must stress that Greece is among the few European countries (France and Italy follow a similar pattern) in which two different professional titles are used to “distinguish between similar staff working in different settings” (European Commission /EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, 95-96). Those working with younger children in infant/child centers are called early childhood educators/childcare workers (*vrefonipiokomoi*), while those working with older children aged 4 to 6, in kindergarten schools are called teachers (*kindergarten*). Further Greece is an exception since the length of preparation for educators and teachers is the same (with different content) (European Commission /EACEA/Eurydice /Eurostat, 2014, 95-96). Thus, although initially the departments of the Higher Educational Institutions (ATEI) were named as ‘Department of Early Childhood Education and Care’ (*Tmima Vrefonipiokomias*) currently all three ATEI departments in Greece have been renamed into

‘Department of Early Childhood Education’ (*Tmima Prosxolikis Agogis*)², following the university departments which are called ‘Department of Early Childhood Education’ (*Tmima Ekpaeideusis kai Agogis stin Prosxoliki Ilikia*) or ‘Department of Nursery Education’ (*Tmima Nipiagogon*). So, we have the same length of studies and equivalent titles for early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers. However, ATEI departments are positioned in the Faculty of Health and Welfare Professions, whereas university departments are positioned in the Faculty of Education. This segregation has resulted into considering ATEI departments as ones which focus on children’s development and care rather than on children’s education, as university departments do. As Macfarlane & Lewis, (2004, p. 58) suggested “in Foucauldian terms, childcare was strongly governed by the humanist and psychological discourses, which produced society’s view of health and welfare. With respect to childcare, these discourses acted to privilege development over education”.

The Present Study: Current Initiatives for ECEC Policy Reforms in Greece

Although traditionally, Greece had a dichotomous system of childcare and early education, in 2016 the government's Organization for ECEC organized an open colloquy about the adoption of a "Unified National Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care", causing a heated political debate. In the invitation to the open colloquy, reference was made to the importance of ECEC for children's overall development as well as to EU member states' initiatives for unified ECEC systems (birth to entry to primary school) (http://www.syriza.gr/article/id/63855/Prosklыш-SYRIZA-Proscholikhs-Agwghs-NE-Paideias.html#.VymbW_mLTIV).

The Pan-Hellenic Association of Early Childhood Educators - PAECE (the association of early childhood educators working in Child and Infant/Child Centers), welcomes this initiative enthusiastically and an urgent announcement is published on PAECE's website which refers both on the problems Infant/Child centers face due to the recession and to the need for unifying higher education training systems (ATEI and Universities) (<http://www.pasvn.gr/en/news/354-epeigoni-enimerosi-melon.html>).

However, this initiative drew immediate negative reactions from the coordinating body of kindergarten teachers as well as from university departments. The coordinating body of kindergarten teachers released an announcement that referred to a "national monologue" (<https://sites.google.com/site/syntonistikonipagogon/home/oethnikosmonologostouypourgeioupaideias>) rather than "colloquy" and suggested that "the adoption of a unified national ECEC framework for children 0-6 years old, would degrade the quality of ECEC, and that the integration of child care and early education systems, which have distinct roles, would create a chaotic situation in education, the consequences of which would be disastrous for

children and for the educational system of the country" (<https://www.alfavita.gr/arthron/syntonistikonipagogon-dihroni-ypohreotiki-prosholiki-agogi>).

Other announcements as well see the light of publicity which refer to Infant/Child centers (as opposed to kindergarten schools) as the place where "the child will go in order to play, to laugh, to eat", as a "parking place" where we leave children because we do not have another place to leave them. Kindergarten is not (as opposed to Child and Infant/Child centers) a place where the child is going to learn songs, games and mess around without meaning and context (<http://www.ipaideia.gr/giati-einai-kathoristikos-o-rolos-tou-nipiagogeiou.htm>)³.

Rather surprisingly, university departments also reacted to the government's proposal for a unified ECEC. The department of preschool education at the University of Crete uploaded the Department's position about the unification of ECEC and the training of "childcare workers" and "kindergarten teachers" (Pedagogical Department of Preschool Education, March 28, 2016). According to the department, the unification of ECEC would lead to the collapse of both services (kindergarten schools and infant/child centers) and especially to the collapse of the educational services (kindergarten schools) due to the fact that "education will be provided by professionals who are not educators but child-minders....[and] who do not possess the knowledge to carry out the educational work successfully and effectively" (Pedagogical Department of Preschool Education, March 28, 2016, pp. 2-3).

The rector of the Department of Preschool Education at the University of Florina, also sent a letter with the department's position towards the integration of ECEC systems to kindergarten the teachers' coordinating body (<https://www.facebook.com/SyntonistikoNipiagogon/posts/1059916647418066>). As stated in the letter

The integration of two distinct scientific areas is a stimulus for further deregulation and disorganization of professional qualifications and therefore professional

rights deriving from these areas... So beyond that, it does not help either of them also harms those who must serve: in our case children from early age to preschool education. We concur with the stance to maintain clearly separated the two scientific professions.

(<https://www.facebook.com/SyntunistikoNipiagogon/posts/1059916647418066>)

Originating from the reactions described above towards Greek governments' initiative for ECEC policy reform, the present study attempts to explore "a problem of the present" (Macfarlane and Lewis, 2004, p. 51). The present study is unique because it attempts to explore the qualifications of all professional groups working in the two ECEC institutions operating in Greece, and intends to fill the gap of existing literature by exploring ECEC professional groups' ability to implement integrated ECEC systems. As already stated, current policy reform initiatives in Greece have brought to the surface a back stair segregation between kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators which persists. Prompted by the reactions described earlier we questioned the causes of disintegration and we explored the extent to which the dichotomy between care and education was reinforced by workforce profiles and by each professional groups' actual qualifications (acquired during their initial teacher preparation program) or on social, political and cultural reasons. This rational stems from Haddad's (2006) argument that "the parallelism observed in the ECEC systems is not necessarily a result of the dual origin of early childhood education institutions, and that the integration of services, in the sense of unifying objectives and practices, is not a static, linear concept and does not bear an evolutionist undertone" (Haddad, 2006, p. 5).

Finally, we considered it necessary to explore early childhood educators' preparedness to adopt educare approaches, since according to Starting Strong II report practitioners' task, whatever their profile, should be geared towards a holistic approach (OECD, 2006). Taking into account the Greek government's potential intent to move towards that goal, research about ECEC

workforce readiness to respond to the requirements inherent to this goal is imperative.

Method

Sample

Data for the present study was collected in spring 2016, employing snowball and convenience sampling techniques.

The sample consisted of 233 early childhood educators working in all 13 Greek regions. Most of the participants (62.9%) worked in preschool settings operating in Attica and 13.8% of the respondents worked in settings in central Macedonia. Of the 233 participants only 3 were male (1.3%) confirming previous research results from Greece which highlight the low numbers of male ECEC educators (Rentzou and Ziganitidou, 2009). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 56 years ($M = 37.18$, $SD = 8.64$) and the years of their experience ranged from 0 to 34 years ($M = 12.88$, $SD = 7.94$).

As far as participants' level of education is concerned 25.4% of them had attended post-secondary education institutions which train assistant childcare workers, 43.3% were ATEI graduates, 28.8% had graduated from universities, 12.1% held a Masters' degree and 4.2% had another educational qualification. Participants' graduation year ranged from 1977 to 2016.

In the present study, all professional groups working in all types of preschool settings operating in Greece were represented. 20% of the participants worked as main early childhood educators of the classroom, 17.5% worked as kindergarten teachers, 14.17% as early childhood educators, 11.25% as assistant early childhood educators, 10.42% as principals of the center, 9.17% as main kindergarten teachers, 7.5% were students who did their 6-months practicum, and 3.75% had another role (6.25% missing). Most of the participants (58.8%) worked in settings operated by municipalities. 28.8% of them worked in public settings, 7.1% in private settings and .08% in other types of settings.

Turning to the age group with which participants worked, the greatest number of respondents (31.7%) worked with mixed-aged groups. Of the respondents working in day care

centers, 19.2% responded that they implement the operation regulation and 7.9% of them that they implement the internal regulation formulated by the municipality to which they work. On the other hand, 19.2 of the respondents working in kindergarten schools responded that they implement the National Curriculum. Almost half of the respondents, 40.8%, did not answer the question about the curriculum implemented at their work-site.

Measures and Procedures

To examine in-service early childhood educators' views on the quality of their initial education and training and on how well prepared they feel to work in integrated ECEC programs, the authors adopted and adapted items from the questionnaire employed and prepared by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2016).

The first author of the paper communicated with the contact person listed in the questionnaire, to ask his permission to translate the questionnaire into Greek and to adopt and adapt items. After obtaining consent, using back and forth techniques the questionnaire was translated in Greek.

The questionnaire developed by the Irish Department of Education and Skills (2016) has 5 sections: background information (4 items); your current role in the early years sector (16 items); your highest qualification in early childhood care and education (12 items); extent to which your education and training prepared you to work in early years settings (22 items); and a final section intended to obtain respondents views on broader issues relevant to ECEC (5 items).

The adapted survey consists of 4 sections. The first section includes 6 demographic information questions. The second section includes 4 questions concerning the preschool program at which respondents work. The third is the main section of the questionnaire and aims at obtaining participants' views on how well the training program they attended has prepared them on various aspects inherent to ECEC theory and practice. Items fall under the following 6 categories: "Child development" (7 items), "Education and Play" (18 items), "Health

and Wellbeing" (9 items), "Social Environment" (6 items), "Personal Professional Development" (5 items) and "Communication, Management and Administration" (4 items). The final section was prepared by the first author of the paper and was intended to explore participants' views on how well they are prepared to provide programs that integrate care and education, the qualifications needed for someone to work in integrated programs and the changes that should be done, in terms of qualifications and training, in case Greece adopts an integrated ECEC system.

Analysis

When exploring total sample's level of preparation, analysis indicated that the sample was better prepared on aspects inherent to child development ($M = 4.22$, $S.D. = .59$) and worst prepared on education and play factors ($M = 3.85$, $S.D. = .62$). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the 6 dimensions of ECEC theory and practice for the total sample.

To explore differences in preparation among groups we employed one-way ANOVA analysis and Post-hoc tests. In terms of the 'Child development' factor ANOVA analysis revealed statistically significant differences among the professional groups only in the factor concerning early childhood educators' ability to provide for children's holistic development ($F(8, 216) = 2.59$, $p = .010$). Post-hoc Least Significant Difference (LSD) tests revealed further differences among groups and showed that childcare workers perceive that they are not as well prepared as other professional groups on certain aspects of the child development category.

Turning to how well each group of ECEC teachers believe that they have been prepared on various aspects inherent to preschool children's education and play, ANOVA analysis revealed statistically significant differences among participants based on their professional role in the following items: 'Knowledge of underlying theories on importance of play for children' ($F(8, 215) = 2.25$, $p = .025$), 'Knowledge of children's different styles of learning' ($F(8, 216) = 3.98$, $p = .000$), 'Supporting children's

language and literacy development' ($F(8, 216) = 2.24$, $p. = .025$), and 'Supporting the development of early mathematical skills and numeracy' ($F(8, 216) = 2.13$, $p. = 0.34$). Post-hoc LSD test revealed significant differences among students who are currently doing their practice and other participants. Students feel that they do not have enough knowledge of underlying theories on importance of play for children compared to other participants. LSD test also revealed significant differences at the 0.05 level in the mean scores assigned by assistants (both kindergarten and childcare teacher assistants) and other groups in terms of their knowledge about children's different learning styles. In terms of participants' ability to develop, implement and evaluate a curriculum according to LSD test results main teachers of the classroom who are university graduates are better prepared compared to childcare teachers, childcare teacher assistants and students who are doing their practice. Thus, analysis indicated that main teachers of the classroom who are university graduates have a better knowledge of the national curriculum /guidelines and how to use it whereas childcare teachers are the least well prepared on this factor compared to kindergarten teachers, childcare teacher assistants and students. As far as the ability to use a range of interaction strategies and methods is concerned, analysis revealed statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level between principals and childcare teachers whereas kindergarten teacher assistants

were the least well prepared to introduce a wide variety of educational/play activities and to organize and maintain an appropriate environment compared to all other groups. Statistically significant differences were also shown concerning childcare teachers' ability to support children' language and literacy development as well as their mathematical skills as compared to principals', main teachers' (both university and ATEI graduates) and kindergarten teachers' ability. Concerning our sample's preparation to cater for children's special educational needs, none of the groups are well prepared. Interestingly, according to LSD test results, students who do their practice are better prepared compared to principals, main teachers who are ATEI graduates and kindergarten teachers. The participants of the present study are also not well prepared to use ICT to support children's learning. LSD analysis showed statistically significant differences between principals and main teacher who are university graduates as well as between childcare teacher assistants and main teachers who are university graduates. According to LSD results childcare teachers reported to be more aware of the value of research compared to kindergarten teachers. Finally, the mean difference among kindergarten teacher assistants and all other professional groups (except for childcare teachers and students) on the item concerning participants' ability to develop and implement an emerging program is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 1.

Level of Preparation on 6 dimensions of ECEC theory and practice

Category	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Child development	232	1.86	5.00	4.22	.59
Education and play	232	1.94	5.00	3.85	.62
Health and well-being	232	1.44	5.00	4.02	.74
Social environment	232	1.50	5.00	4.05	.74
Personal and professional development	230	1.00	5.00	4.16	.80
Communication, organization and management	229	1.00	5.00	4.03	.88

*Note. Respondents were asked to report on a 5 point scale (1 = we didn't learn about that and 5 = very well) how well prepared they feel being in each of the items. Min represents the lowest score assigned and Max the highest score in each item.

ANOVA analysis also revealed significant statistical differences (p. value ranging from .000 to .006) between groups in almost all items of the 'Health and well-being' factor. Only on the 'Knowledge of child protection policy, procedures and good practice' and the 'Organization of activities that promote children's physical activity' items ANOVA analysis revealed no difference between groups. Post hoc LSD test revealed significant differences at the 0.05 level among kindergarten assistants and all other groups in the item referring to the knowledge of regulations. Turning to hygiene procedures main teachers of the classroom who are university graduates are not as well prepared as those who are ATEI graduates (both main teachers and childcare workers), childcare assistants and students. Kindergarten teachers are also less prepared compared to main teachers who are ATEI graduates, childcare assistants and students. The same differences among the groups involving kindergarten and childcare teachers were also revealed about health and safety regulations and in children's principal health and nutritional needs, with the different groups of kindergarten

teachers being less well prepared. LSD test also revealed significant differences between kindergarten teachers and principals, main teachers who are TEI graduates, childcare teachers, childcare teacher assistants and students in terms of ability to perform first-aid procedures. Kindergarten teachers are also less well prepared as far as knowledge of child protection policy, procedures and good practice compared to ATEI graduates who work as main teachers in the classroom and childcare teacher assistants and less well prepared to organize activities that promote children's physical activity compared to principals, ATEI graduates (both main teachers and childcare teachers) and their assistants. Finally, LSD post hoc analysis showed that university graduates (both main teachers and kindergarten teachers) are less well prepared to adopt a caring approach as opposed to childcare professional groups (principals, main teachers who are ATEI graduates, childcare teachers and their assistants and students). Table 2 presents how well-prepared participants feel on selected aspects that concern children's health and well-being based on their professional role.

Table 2.

Greek early childhood educators' level of preparedness on selected health and well-being aspects by professional group

Health and Well-being factors		Principal	Main teacher – Uni	Main teacher – ATEI	Child care teacher	Kindergarten teacher	Kindergarten teacher assistant	Child care teacher assistant	Student Practicum
Knowledge of pre-school operation regulations	N	25	22	48	34	41	3	26	18
	Mean	3.92	4.00	3.96	3.91	4.00	2.67	4.35	4.61
	SD	.90	.75	.92	.96	.80	1.52	.68	.50
Knowledge of health and safety regulations	N	25	22	48	34	42	3	27	18
	Mean	4.20	3.77	4.54	4.21	3.67	4.00	4.67	4.83
	SD	1.00	1.19	.61	.91	1.26	1.00	.55	.51
Knowledge of children's basic health needs	N	25	22	48	34	41	3	27	18
	Mean	4.40	3.77	4.56	4.24	3.88	4.00	4.59	4.50
	SD	.76	1.02	.61	.89	1.05	1.00	.50	.78
Organization of activities that promote children's physical activity	N	25	22	48	34	42	3	27	18
	Mean	4.32	4.14	4.21	4.26	3.76	3.67	4.37	4.17
	SD	.80	.64	.65	.66	1.16	.57	.62	.98
Ability to take a caring approach (feeding, toileting, nurturing, etc.)	N	25	22	48	34	42	3	27	18
	Mean	4.24	3.55	4.42	4.18	3.38	3.00	4.59	4.17
	SD	1.01	1.53	.98	1.31	1.32	1.00	1.01	.78

The number of N under each professional group (e.g. 25 principals, 22 main teachers – uni, etc

Table 3. Greek early childhood educators' level of preparedness on selected social environment aspects by professional group

Social Environment factors		Principal	Main teacher – Uni	Main teacher – ATEI	Childcare teacher	Kindergarten teacher	Kindergarten teacher assistant	Childcare teacher assistant	Student Practicum
Knowledge of the importance of social and environmental factors and their impact on children's holistic development	N	24	22	47	34	41	3	27	18
	Mean	4.21	4.59	4.45	4.32	4.49	4.00	4.41	4.28
	SD	.83	.59	.61	.63	.55	1.00	.93	.66
Ability to establish and maintain appropriate relationships with families	N	25	22	48	34	42	3	27	18
	Mean	4.24	4.05	4.27	4.41	3.83	3.33	4.52	4.33
	SD	.83	1.13	1.04	.78	1.26	.57	1.01	.90
Ability to liaise and maintain relationships in the wider environment	N	25	22	48	34	41	3	27	18
	Mean	3.92	3.73	3.71	3.97	3.61	1.67	4.11	3.78
	SD	.95	1.20	1.11	.83	1.13	1.15	1.05	1.11

The number of N under each professional group (e.g. 25 principals, 22 main teachers – uni, etc

Turning to aspects concerning the social environment, ANOVA analysis indicated statistically significant differences between groups based in their professional role in participants' ability to liaise and maintain relationships in the wider environment ($F(8, 215) = 2.18$, $p = .030$) and in their ability to families' understanding of and involvement in children's learning and development ($F(8, 216) = 1.93$, $p = .057$). According to the post hoc LSD test results kindergarten teachers are less well prepared to establish and maintain effective relationships with parents compared to childcare teacher professional groups (main teachers of the classroom who are ATEI graduates, childcare teachers and their assistants). Also, kindergarten teachers are not as well as childcare teacher assistants prepared to support families' understanding of and involvement in children's learning and development. Thus, kindergarten teacher

assistants are the least prepared group compared to all other groups to liaise and maintain relationships in the wider environment. Table 3 presents how well-prepared participants feel on selected aspects that concern the social environment based on their professional role.

As far as participants' level of preparation in terms of personal and professional development aspects, is concerned ANOVA analysis showed statistically significant differences between groups in all aspects of personal and professional development with exception participants' ability to get involved in self-evaluation procedures. In all other items of this category p. value ranged from .001 to .045. LSD post-hoc analysis showed that kindergarten teachers are less prepared at developing the values, attitudes and dispositions appropriate for their role as compared to main teachers of the classroom who are ATEI graduates but

better prepared compared to childcare teacher assistants. Childcare teacher assistants have also been found to be better prepared on this aspect compared to childcare teachers. Further, kindergarten teachers were found to be less self-aware compared to all other groups and to be less able to identify their learning needs compared to main teachers (both ATEI and university graduates), childcare teachers, childcare teacher assistants and students. Finally, LSD analysis revealed that main teachers who are both university and ATEI graduates are more able to manage their self and take responsibility compared to childcare teacher assistants and students, childcare teachers surprisingly less able compared to students and more able compared to kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers less able than principals, childcare teachers, their assistants and students, etc.

Finally, in terms of different professional groups' preparedness on aspects concerning communication, organization and management skills, ANOVA analysis showed statistically significant differences between groups only in sample's ability to work as a team with other professional groups within a service ($F(8, 213) = 3.51, p. = 0.01$). According to LSD post hoc test results principals are more able than kindergarten teachers to work cooperatively with other groups. Childcare teacher assistants and students are also more able compared to main teacher of the classroom who are university graduates as well as childcare teachers, whereas main teachers who are ATEI graduates are more able compared to kindergarten teachers. Analysis also revealed that kindergarten teachers are less able to communicate effectively with children and other adults compared to main

teachers who are ATEI graduates, childcare teacher assistants and students. Thus, kindergarten teachers and their assistants are less able to communicate information to parents compared to principals and childcare teacher assistants, whereas childcare teachers are also less able compared to their assistants.

Participants were also asked to report how well prepared they feel to offer programs which provide only education, only care and programs that integrate both care and education. Although the sample is overall well prepared to provide all three types of programs (Table 4), ANOVA analysis indicated that based on their professional role participants have statistically significant differences in providing education ($F(8, 214) = 3.53, p. = .001$), care ($F(8, 214) = 10.02, p. = .000$) and integrated programs that combine education and care ($F(8, 216) = 2.88, p. = .005$). Post-hoc LSD analysis revealed that principals and main teachers in the classrooms (both university and ATEI graduates) are better prepared to offer education to preschool children compared to childcare teachers and kindergarten teachers and their assistants. Thus, childcare and kindergarten teachers have been found to be better prepared than their assistants. In terms of care, as it was expected, university graduates working both as main teachers and kindergarten teachers, are less prepared than principals, ATEI graduates, students and post-secondary institutions' graduates to provide care. Finally, students who do their practice and principals were found to be the best prepared to implement an integrated approach which combines education and care whereas main teachers of the classroom who are university graduates had statistically significant differences with all groups working in day care settings.

Table 4.

Greek early childhood educators' level of preparedness to provide different types of ECEC programs by professional group

Type of Program		Principal	Main teacher – Uni	Main teacher – ATEI	Childcare teacher	Kindergarten teacher	Kindergarten teacher assistant	Childcare teacher assistant	Student Practicum
Ability to provide education to preschool children	N	24	22	48	34	41	3	27	18
	Mean	4.33	4.32	4.35	3.91	3.93	3.33	4.41	4.17
	SD	.76	.78	.66	.66	.75	.57	.57	.51
Ability to provide care to preschool children	N	25	22	47	34	41	3	27	18
	Mean	4.24	3.59	4.47	4.21	3.51	4.00	4.59	4.50
	SD	.87	.90	.65	.77	.89	0.00	.57	.51
Ability to organize programs that combine care and education	N	25	22	48	34	42	3	27	18
	Mean	4.04	3.32	4.10	3.94	3.62	3.00	4.00	4.50
	SD	1.17	.94	.95	.81	1.01	1.00	1.35	.51

The number of N under each professional group (e.g. 25 principals, 22 main teachers – uni, etc

Discussion

The dichotomy that characterizes ECEC internationally is a vicious circle which is fed by societal attitudes towards the role of ECEC institutions (Rentzou, 2011; 2013), discursive reasons inherent to the segregation of care and education as well as to issues of professionalism in ECEC which among others highlight that the lower the educational level the more de-professionalized it is (Peeters, 2012). Further ECEC structure influences and at the same time is influenced by the training systems available for ECEC professionals.

The present study aimed at exploring how well prepared various ECEC professional groups are to implement programs that combine education and care. The need for this study stems from current policy reform initiatives in Greece and especially from the dispute that raised between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers. More precisely, taking into consideration arguments formulated both by kindergarten teachers and university

departments which suggest that early childhood educators are not adequately prepared to provide education and their role is primarily a caring one and based on research finding which suggest that "not only the level of education but also the content of the staff's educational or training curriculum is important for the level of quality in ECEC" (OECD, 2012, p. 147), the study aimed at exploring how prepared all professional groups feel to provide education and care. We purposefully selected all professional groups since in case an integrated approach should be adopted not only early childhood educators should be prepared to provide education but also kindergarten teachers, who seem to separate themselves from caring aspects, should be ready to provide care.

Results of the present study suggest that the sample is well prepared on all aspects inherent to ECEC theory and practice. As it was expected the study revealed differences in level of preparation on various aspects among different professional groups working in Greek

preschool programs. In terms of Child development aspects analysis revealed that principals and main teachers in the classrooms (both ATEI and university graduates) had higher ratings in most items. Students were also found to be more well-prepared on several aspects of child development. On the other hand, childcare teachers and kindergarten teacher assistants appear to be the least prepared on various child development factors.

Participants' professional role has also been found to predict their level of preparedness on aspects inherent to Education and play. Kindergarten teacher assistants were the least well prepared on various aspects of education and play. On the other hand, main teacher of the classroom who were university graduates and to some extend principals were more well prepared on issues concerning preschoolers' pre-academic skills such as styles of learning, development and implementation of the curriculum and children's literacy and numeracy development, a finding which highlight the more academic focus of kindergarten schools, probably at the expense of play. Thus, according to the analysis none of the professional groups is well prepared for catering for different groups' special educational needs as well as for using ICT to support children's learning. Childcare workers' preparedness on education and play aspects has been found to be in between in most items of the subscale. However, they were found to be ill prepared on aspects concerning pre-academic skills and their ability to provide variety of activities and interaction strategies.

Analysis showed that Health and well-being as well as Personal and professional development are the factors which are most affected by participants' professional role. Students, childcare teachers' assistants and main teachers who are ATEI graduates have been found to be better prepared compared to other professional groups in many items. In addition,

as it was expected main teachers who were university graduates and kindergarten teachers were the least prepared on many items of the Health and well-being factor. Turning to Personal and professional development, surprisingly childcare teacher assistants and students had the highest scores in almost all items of the scale whereas kindergarten teachers and their assistants had the lowest scores. In terms of social environment aspects childcare teachers' assistants were found to be better prepared on several aspects of the factor. Finally, in terms of Communication, organization and management aspects childcare teacher assistants and students had the highest scores in almost all items as opposed to kindergarten teachers and their assistants which had the lowest scores in almost all items.

Overall, analysis indicated that university graduates (both main teachers and kindergarten teachers) feel less well prepared to provide care to children. Interestingly kindergarten teachers had also lower scores on the item concerning provision of education to preschool children compared to principals, main teachers who are ATEI graduates and childcare teacher assistants. Thus, students had the highest score concerning participants' ability to provide programs that integrate education and care whereas main teacher who are university graduates and kindergarten teachers' assistants had the lowest scores.

The above results highlight on the one hand the *schoolification* of kindergarten schools and the emphasis given on preparing children for primary school and on the other hand "a further disembodiment of education, with the body being subordinate to the mind....[a thinking which]... has been contested due to children's natural learning strategies – play, exploration, freedom of movement, relations and discussions with other children – being less

encouraged" (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2016, p.1).

Further, research results suggest that kindergarten teachers' training emphasizes on children's learning and development for their future school career (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2016), whereas the care component and the holistic development of the child is not addressed. On the other hand, results highlighted various shortcomings on early childhood educators' training as well. Although well prepared on Health and well-being aspects, deficiencies on Child development aspects may also be proven risky for children's holistic development.

According to Penn et al. (2004, p. 6) "integration is currently a topical issue in the field of early childhood provision, but there is considerable confusion about how and why integration should be pursued, and what works in what contexts". Both the reactions to the debate organized by the Greek government and the results of the present study confirm that hypothesis and suggest that Greece is not ready to adopt an integrated ECEC approach.

The integration of ECEC services is not a process that can happen overnight. The existence of split systems creates challenges that require thoughtful consideration to be overcome. First of all, societal attitudes towards ECEC services should be explored since according to Haddad (2006, p. 4) "the development of a coherent and integrated system depends on how society sees these services". Previous results from Greece (Rentzou, 2013) suggest that day care centers are considered mainly welfare institutions and that parents of both infants/toddlers and preschool children assign significance to the human factor, as well as children's care, while less attention is paid to the pedagogical dimension of day care centres, in parents:

teachers' collaboration and to aspects which refer to meeting the needs of educators.

Further "the integration of care and education needs policy interventions at macro, meso and micro levels alike...The implementation of a holistic view of education should be negotiated with all stakeholders...and be addressed in general frameworks on ECEC curricula, initial training and other professional development initiatives" (Van Laere, Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2012, pp.536-537). The reactions of the two university departments to the debate suggest that training institutions are not open to such an effort and highlight the need for the negotiation proposed by Van Laere, Peeters and Vandenbroeck (2012). Training institutions have a significant role to play in this effort. As already stated Greece is among the few countries which have two different professional titles for similar staff working in different settings. Either this segregation continues or not (and we would maintain that this segregation is pointless) they should reconsider their curricula. As the results of the present study suggest Greek ECEC workers need to attend training programs that adopt a "broadly based educate training curriculum as opposed to a discrete education, care or social care approach" (McMillan, 2009, p. 225). In this context we would maintain that all professional groups working in ECEC services should adopt a social pedagogical role which encompasses both care and learning dimensions rather than solely a caring or a learning role.

In addition, it seems that university departments follow the old tradition which suggests that infants and toddlers need care rather than education as preschool children, and they do not understand the caring role of education and the educational role of caring. However, according to Hayes (2007, p. 9) "there is a growing body of research on the critical value of understanding the nature of care and its

role and status in a healthy and equitable society”.

As already stated central to the dichotomy is the professionalism of ECEC sector which is disputed especially for those who work with younger children and adopt caring roles. In this context if we are to adopt an integrated ECEC system we will have to face the challenges this will have for the professionalization of the sector and to employ a normative conceptualization of professionalism which is based on a “*broad and integrated understanding of care, well-being, learning and pedagogy which values reciprocal relationships and an element of not-knowing*” (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman, 2010, p. 496). Besides, previous research results show that the countries with high ECEC professionalism share the following characteristics: integrated ECEC; high qualifications (bachelor’s degree); merge of unions (childcare and kindergarten); pay parity with primary teachers; and wording-terminology that merges care and education (Peeters, 2012; Dalli, 2008).

Previous research exploring the progress of integration in several countries (Kaga et al., 2010) suggests that this process needs to be strong and principled and careful consideration should be given to the conditions needed to achieve integration. Further Haddad (2006, p. 23) postulates that “an ECEC integrated system requires firm political will, state responsibility, and a clear awareness of the comprehensiveness of the functions involved. Given these conditions, an ECEC policy should, under government leadership, involve all society in a joint and convergent enterprise”. However, both the results of the present study and the reactions to Government’s initiatives suggest that this effort is fragmentary and could be characterized as a firework which was cast without prior processing.

To conclude, even though Greek government’s rhetoric may be “espousing the end of di[tri]chotomisation of care, development, and education” (Macfarlane and Lewis, 2004, p. 60), it seems that political and corporatist reasons foster the dichotomy that characterizes ECEC in Greece and ensure its continuity. However, one main question is whether the segregation of care and education caters for children’s needs and whether it is in line with children’s rights. According to Hayes (2010) in split systems limited consideration is given both to children’s needs and rights and to the quality of services available. Hayes (2010) postulation is supported both by research results from Greece which show that the quality of services provided by Greek day care centers is of minimum quality (Rentzou, 2011; 2015) and by the fact that in terms of child rights environment Greece ranks 130-135 internationally (<http://www.kidsrightsindex.org/Child-Rights-Environment>).

Notes:

1. The term ‘educare’ refers to programmes which offer education and care, simultaneously. Caldwell (1989) coined the term ‘educare’ to describe an approach to education that offers a developmentally appropriate mixture of education and care; of stimulation and nurture; of work and play (Caldwell 1989, p. 266)
2. After the present study was accepted for publication, other policy initiatives took place. Among these initiatives is included the rename of two of the three ATEI departments, which were transformed into University departments.
3. In the same context a debate has emerged concerning the mandatory nature of ECEC (but it is out of the scope of this paper). PAECE seems to be opposed to the two-years mandatory nature of ECEC and their rational is based on the argument that if the enrollment in kindergarten school becomes obligatory for two years (currently only one

year is obligatory) this will enhance the dichotomy that already exists. On the other hand, kindergarten teachers champion that idea but are opposed to the unification of ECEC.

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