Early childhood teachers’ relationship with the official curriculum: the mediating role of professional and policy contexts

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore how professional and policy contexts can mediate early childhood teachers’ relationship with the official curriculum. Using their assessment practices as an impetus for discussion, we probed 28 Greek kindergarten teachers to talk about their engagement with the prescribed curriculum and explain how they construct its guidelines at the enactment level. As teachers discussed how they negotiated and adapted to curriculum guidelines on assessment, it emerged that their experiences can be better understood in the contexts within which they occurred. Three themes emerged regarding teachers’ contexts: the way the curriculum change was introduced back in 2003, the role teachers’ professional contexts played in teachers’ effort to make sense of the new curriculum and the permissive policy context Greek kindergarten teachers operate in. The findings provide insight for policymakers, teacher professional development and research.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; curriculum enactment; portfolio assessment; professional contexts

Introduction

Although the current Greek early childhood education curriculum has been criticised as “highly prescriptive” (Sofou, 2010, p. 238), research suggests that Greek kindergarten teachers have a high degree of control over their pedagogical practices (Birbili, in press; Kakana, 2011). Conceptualising the national curriculum as open and flexible teachers mediate the intended curriculum in ways that both agree with and are antithetical to policy intentions (Birbili, 2017; Sofou & Tsafos, 2010).

Studies of curriculum interpretation in Greek early childhood education have focused mostly on comparing the mandated to the enacted curriculum in order to judge the degree of their alignment. There are also a number of studies that focus on how teachers’ beliefs mediate the planned curriculum (e.g. Kyridis, Tsioumis, Papageridou, & Sotiropoulou, 2015). What seems to be missing is a deeper exploration of kindergarten teachers’ relationship to the official curriculum documents and its impact upon the process of curriculum enactment (Evangelou, 1996; Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). There is also a research gap regarding how the contexts and professional
environments in which teachers work shape teachers’ construction and enactment of the mandated curriculum. For example, Greek kindergarten teachers work in a context that is largely free from the pressures of monitoring and external evaluation (Dimitropoulos & Kindi, 2017; Papatheodorou, 2010). This parameter could filter teachers’ interpretations of the role of the official curriculum in their decision-making.

In this paper, we discuss the findings of a study which aimed to understand why 15 years after the introduction of the current early childhood curriculum, the guidelines about young children’s assessment are either not implemented or not properly implemented by kindergarten teachers (Rekalidou & Penderi, 2016). Using curriculum guidelines on student portfolio as an impetus for discussion we probed teachers to talk about their engagement with the prescribed curriculum and explain how they negotiate its guidelines at the enactment level. As teachers reflected on past and present experiences of implementing the student portfolio it became evident that their responses to the intended curriculum were, as the literature indicates, in recursive relationship with the contexts in which they worked (Stritikus, 2003). Using the context as a resource for understanding curriculum enactment (Singh, Heimans, & Glasswell, 2014) we further probed into a less researched area of the dynamic relationship between curriculum and context: how teachers make sense of the prescribed curriculum in educational policy contexts like Greece which allow teachers the kind of freedom that stems from weak monitoring mechanisms.

Following this introduction, we briefly discuss some key features of the Greek education system that make the Greek case an interesting site in which to explore the impact of contexts on curriculum interpretation and enactment. We then explain our theoretical background and the methodology of the study. In the following two sections we present and discuss the results in relation to pertinent theory and research evidence. Our focus on how contexts mediate curriculum enactment provides insight for policymakers, teacher professional development and research so we conclude the paper with a brief discussion of the implications of our work.

The Greek context

Two characteristics of the Greek educational system that have been discussed repeatedly in international reports are the top-down approach to policymaking and the weak monitoring and accountability frameworks (Dimitropoulos & Kindi, 2017; OECD, 2017).

Notwithstanding “modest moves” that have been made in times of over sweeping reforms, the Greek education system is still described as centralised and distant from local school communities (OECD, 2017, p. 7, 2018). An apparent indicator of the centralisation of the Greek education system, relevant to this paper, is the top-down approach to curriculum planning and the prescription of a national curriculum for early childhood, primary and secondary education. In common with other countries, school curricula in Greece are developed by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with a state appointed advisory body, the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP). Unlike other countries, however, curricula in primary and secondary education are accompanied by curriculum guides and school textbooks which have been produced and approved centrally and which prescribe in detail what should be taught and how it is to be taught (Dimitropoulos & Kindi, 2017; Moutsios, 1998). Interestingly, despite the
strong prescription of the content and the process of teaching, decision-making over
assessment procedures is handed to teachers. In practice, this means that evaluation has
become an affair internal to the classroom (Moutsios, 1998, p. 197). According to
Moutsios (1998, p. 197) this “approach” proves that the state is more interested in
making explicit (and monitor) what is to be taught rather than what is learned in
schools.

Equally resistant to change is the Greek system’s weakness to establish systematic
mechanisms of quality assurance. Despite the many announcements, the pilot trials funded
by the European Union (see, for example, school self-evaluation at the school level) and the
Laws that have recently passed (e.g. Law 4142/2013) “there are still no reliable indicators in
place that provide information on the quality and effectiveness of the system” (OECD,
2011, p. 14, 2018). For example, neither assessment of student performance nor teacher
evaluation is used to regulate or monitor the effective implementation of the official
curricular policy (as is common in many countries). At the same time, attempts to support
a “nascent accountability culture” (OECD, 2018, p. 4) are hindered by vague legislative
language and unclear guidelines in policy documents (Moutsios, 1998).

Until recently, the closest to a monitoring mechanism for what is going on in schools
and kindergartens was the role of School Advisors, experienced educators who were
expected “to offer teachers scientific and pedagogical guidance”, “participate in the
evaluation of the educational work and the educators under their charge” and “recom-
 mend professional development programs for teachers who show weaknesses in their
work” (Government Gazette, 1340/16.10.2002, p. 17886). With the available guidance
being too vague to be useful to the parties involved, School Advisors have ended up
reporting on “what the state [has] introduced in schools rather than on what [is]
performed in them” (Moutsios, 1998, p. 273). In 2018 the role of the School Advisor
was replaced by that of “Coordinator of Educational Work” (CEW). In the Government
Gazette (4299/27.9.2018) describing the duties and responsibilities of CEW it is clear
that teacher appraisal or evaluation is not part of the “new” policy role.

**The early childhood curriculum**

The current national early childhood curriculum was introduced in 2003. It came to
replace a curriculum, which had been introduced in 1989, following the Greek tradition
of reforming curricula in a very slow pace and usually without a proper evaluation of
the existing curriculum (Krikas, 2009).

The 2003 early childhood curriculum (Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for
Kindergarten – CTCF) was introduced at the same time with the “new” primary and
secondary school curricula in an effort “to construct a general framework of principles
within which the curriculum of preschool, primary and secondary education will be in
harmony and interaction with one another” (Krikas, 2009, p. 177). Some authors argue
that the result of this decision was that the outcome culture intended for upper
educational levels was integrated in kindergarten (Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). With more
than 100 “objectives” from five learning areas the curriculum is seen as overly pre-
scriptive (Sofou, 2010) (yet its task narrative can be described as illustrative rather than
mandatory). The 30 pages curriculum document was accompanied by a 431 page-long
Preschool Teacher’s Guide.
When introduced in 2003, the current curriculum represented a significant departure from the existing orientation of Greek early childhood education. With the new curricular documents teachers were guided to “move” from developmental to socio-cultural theory, from a maturationist view of intellectual growth towards practices that acknowledge the dynamic, interactive model of the child’s relationship to his/her environment and from a view of learning as the direct result of teaching to a view of teaching as mediation (Evangelou, 1996, p. 40). Key features of the current curriculum that reflect these changes are the promotion of cross-thematic approach to knowledge and teaching, the organisation of the curriculum in “learning areas/programs” (instead of domains/areas of child development), and the introduction of instructional approaches, like Project Based Learning and thematic learning. Taking a socio-constructivist view to learning the “new” curriculum also promotes the concept of formative assessment and the use of the student portfolio. Acknowledging that “assessment plays a foundational role in every organized and systematic educational practice”, the CTCF guides teachers to choose methods that “give emphasis to the process of learning construction and foreground children’s communicative skills, the development of responsibility through collective work and the development of critical thinking” (Pedagogical Institute, 2003, p. 592). Teachers are also told that “traditional forms of assessment which evaluate mainly children’s performance in the cognitive sector” do not have a place in kindergarten (Pedagogical Institute, 2003, p. 592).

While it is the product of central planning and control (and binding, as national curricula are supposed to be) the official curriculum document does not make clear what is mandatory and what is optional. Monitoring the effective implementation of the curriculum is left upon the hands of School Advisors but, as mentioned earlier, there are no sanctions if teachers do not adhere to the official curriculum goals (Evangelou, 1996). This situation has led some authors to point out that “the actual practice of early childhood education in Greece remains largely at the discretion of the kindergarten teacher” (Evangelou, 1996, p. 42; Papatheodorou, 2010).

From the intended to the enacted curriculum

In the present study, we adopt the term curriculum enactment in order to discuss the perceived gap between curriculum intentions and teachers’ assessment practices in the classroom. While they are often used interchangeably the terms curriculum implementation and curriculum enactment have come to indicate a different conceptualisation of curriculum use in practice as a result of curriculum study (Remillard & Heck, 2014). Curriculum enactment is suggested as a more useful term for describing the ongoing process of curriculum implementation (Marsh, 2009, p. 66). From an enactment perspective, curriculum development is “an emergent, jointly constructed entity” (Remillard & Heck, 2014, p. 712), an on-going, creative process in which the teacher “works ‘with’ the curriculum, adapting its ‘guidelines’ to practical classroom needs, and addressing curriculum commonplaces while developing a tailored, modified version of the curriculum through a process of deliberation” (Shkedi, 2009, p. 851). As it becomes clear, this process involves both interpretation and translation although the degree of freedom for interpretation varies from policy to policy “in relation to the apparatuses of
power within which [it is set] and within the constraints and possibilities of context” (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012, p. 3).

This approach to curriculum development has significant implications for studying teachers’ response to the prescribed curriculum. Firstly, it assumes that the teacher is “an active designer of the curriculum rather than merely a transmitter or implementer” (Remillard, 2005, p. 214). Secondly, it resists the idea that classroom practice is just a “space of implementation” which can be “reduced to the dual simplicity of frontal resistance or submissive acceptance” (Lopes, 2016, p. 3). Viewing curriculum enactment through a co-construction logic (Datnow & Park, 2010) also implies that it is a process sensitive to the context in which it takes place and the histories of those involved in it. The interplay between what a curriculum document says, the various interpretations made by the stakeholders involved in implementing curriculum policy and the interaction of the multiples sites in which curriculum making occurs makes the process messy, unpredictable and filled with tensions and frustrations (Hume & Coll, 2010; Priestley & Philippou, 2018). It also produces, as Priestley and Philippou (2018, p. 154) say “unique social practices”.

The literature has long established that moving from the official curriculum document to the enacted curriculum involves teachers making decisions while influenced by a range of factors (Edwards, 2011). Besides the official written curriculum and support materials, teachers’ decisions and judgements are also mediated by factors like their conceptions about teaching, learning and children, their professional knowledge, their professional identities and expertise and their curriculum ideologies (Edwards, 2011; Schiro, 2013). Reddan (2006) has added another interesting parameter which may affect teachers’ curriculum practices, that of teachers’ perceived curriculum decision-making space. As he explains, the concept suggests that the decision-making space, for each teacher, is in fact a “perceptually-defined space” which teachers see as “comprised of a number of possible options” (p. 17).

While aspects such as teacher biography, professional identity and beliefs influence where teachers stand, the translation of curriculum intention is made more complex by a range of contextualising factors (Maguire, Braun, & Ball, 2015). Studies of curriculum decision-making process indicate “sources”, or “sites of influence” within the educational context that “support and promote particular interpretations of ‘worthwhile’ learning” (Hume & Coll, 2010, p. 44). Hume and Coll (2010) explain that these sites of influence are “contexts or ‘arenas of action’ where participants have shared understandings of concepts and ideas due to the shared social contexts” (p. 44). Such sites of influence in an educational system could be national curriculum documents, state educational support services, including the provision of teacher professional development programmes, publishers of textbooks/commercial publications; and national qualification authorities and qualifications.

In their seminal work on policy enactment at the school level, Ball and his colleagues also point to the importance of “taking context seriously” and use the concept as a heuristic device to understand the contexts that impact on teachers’ work outside the classroom (Ball et al., 2012, p. 19). They identify four overlapping and interrelated contextual dimensions-situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts and external contexts – which present “a set of objective conditions in relation to a set of subjective ‘interpretational’ dynamics’ (p. 21). Among them, one finds contextualising factors that have been neglected in previous research like
history, demography, location, budgets and buildings. Ball et al.’s (2012) approach to context implies a relational sense of context which means that no context is privileged over the others; the focus of analysis is on the reciprocal relationship among them, or as Datnow and Park (2010, p. 12) put it, on how part and whole shape each other.

Focusing on the contextualised aspect of practice also draws attention to the social interactions of those making sense of policy (Hardy, 2015). In the dynamic, multifaceted, recursive process where policy becomes practice (Hardy, 2015) “a host of visible and hidden” participants (Kingdon, 1995 as cited in Malen, 2006, p. 86), who may or may not acknowledge one another, develop relationships that influence the quality of policy implementation. The role of these relationships, and the dynamics behind them, is paramount in that they “create shared understandings that act as lenses through which new policies are screened, filtered and dissected for meaning, resonance and relevance” (Sheikh & Bagley, 2018, p. 44).

The study

In the study discussed here we explored the implementation of portfolio assessment in Greek kindergarten classrooms guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent is portfolio assessment used in today’s kindergarten classrooms?
- How do teachers assess young children’s learning and progress?
- How does the official curriculum figure into teachers’ decisions about young children’s assessment?

In this paper, we examine the contextual factors that have shaped teachers’ relationship with and responses to the intended curriculum, based on the analysis of the third research question.

The study took a qualitative approach as we wanted to “capture and understand individual definitions, descriptions and meanings of events” (Burns, 2000, p. 388). We chose semi-structured, in depth interviews as the main data collection tool in order to give teachers the opportunity to tell their stories. Craig (2001) argues that “to enter a professional knowledge landscape is to enter a place of story” (as cited in Shkedi, 2009, p. 835) therefore researchers need to select tools that allow teachers to express how they put together the phenomena they experience in order to make sense of the world.

We approached 28 early childhood teachers through purposive sampling. Participants were drawn from the pool of teachers who host student teachers of the School of Early Childhood Education at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, during students’ field experiences. While our sample was not randomly selected, student teachers’ observations during practicum suggested that participants were to a large extent representative of their colleagues in the area of Thessaloniki (a city of 800,000 inhabitants) in terms of not using portfolio assessment or not using it as intended. Data collection took place between February 2018 and September 2018.

Participants were approached and informed about the study either through telephone or in person. One of us (Alexandra) interviewed 20 teachers and the other (Maria) interviewed eight. All interviews were held in teachers’ classrooms after school hours and they were audio-recorded with teachers’ approval. The duration of the interviews was
approximately 30 min per participant. All the interviews were transcribed. We also gathered information on participants’ teaching experience and educational background. Our sample was composed of female practitioners with 13 to 35 years of teaching experience and similar educational background: they all had a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and no further qualifications. Six teachers had attended a 2-year professional development course offered by Universities (abolished in 2012). All but four teachers had worked under both national curricula (the 1989 and the 2002 one). While we acknowledge the influence of biography in understanding teachers’ views and perceptions we are not making extensive reference to this issue in the present discussion. Teachers have been assigned pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Interview data were analysed both within “cases” and “across cases”. The 28 interview accounts were approached as 28 “cases” in order to capture both the uniqueness of teachers’ individual experiences and the narrative dimensions of interviews (Kvale, 1996). Thematic analysis allowed categories and themes to emerge from each interview account which were then analysed in relation to categories and themes from other “cases” in order to identify themes that are common to all cases. For the coding process, we followed an inductive approach with the purpose to allow categories and themes to emerge from data without applying our assumptions. Each researcher performed a first round of open coding and categorisation which was then discussed between the two researchers. The themes that were identified at this initial stage were discussed and finalised during the second round of coding. Data were also analysed for differences in participant characteristics (years of teaching experience, educational qualifications, the experience of the old and the new curriculum). During the whole process, we kept in mind that retrospective perceptions need to be approached carefully as they may be filtered by participants’ defences or current beliefs (Burns, 2000).

Findings

As teachers discussed how they negotiated and adapted to the introduction of portfolio assessment in 2003, three factors emerged to have a significant influence on teachers’ response to curriculum guidelines: the way the curriculum change was introduced back in 2003, the role teachers’ professional contexts played in teachers’ effort to make-sense of the new curriculum and the policy context teachers operate in. We present individual perceptions and influential experiences divided into two periods: “the first years” and “fifteen years later”.

The first years: “I asked colleagues but they were all doing different things”

As the literature on curriculum change emphasises, often, it is not change per se that is the problem for teachers and schools, but the way that change is introduced, monitored and supported (Dinham, 2000, p. 32).

As teachers shared their experiences of the implementation of the student portfolio, they all referred to the first years following curriculum change. They remembered the
“confused School Advisors” and the first “typical briefings” or “simple, informative meetings” that accompanied the introduction of the new curriculum and argued that they began to use the student portfolio with “little practical knowledge” of what was involved in “that new thing they suddenly threw at us” (Matoula). Their comments about the inadequate professional training they received with respect to the new curriculum framework echoed the complaints made by the teachers in Sofou and Tsafos (2010) study, 8 years ago.

Confused about the practical aspects of developing student portfolios, and, perhaps more importantly, unclear about the purpose portfolios serve in young children’s learning, teachers tried to learn more about the new assessment method through the web and discussions with colleagues. The information gained from these sources was not enough or adequate to help participants deal with the challenges involved in developing effective portfolios:

To be honest with you I started using it without having understood what is it exactly that we needed to do. The first two years I was downloading templates from the Internet and every month I was asking children to draw the picture of a person, as they were doing in other kindergartens. But then children got bored, they were saying ‘oh, not that again’. And I stopped. I wasn’t sure how to continue, how to follow children’s progress, as they were saying. (Soula)

They told us about it in the initial training, you know, for the new curriculum. I tried many of the things they said we should do, I even asked children to select which of their drawings they would like to put in [the portfolio]. But the time it took me to do it scared me. Perhaps I was doing something wrong, I don’t know. I asked colleagues but they were all doing different things. (Anastasia)

The “horizontal discourse” (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015, p. 69) among teachers that Anastasia is talking about seemed to have played a critical role in the understanding and the implementation of the new assessment guidelines. As teachers reached out for “helpful messages” (Coburn, 2001) on portfolio assessment they discovered a range of local meanings and practices among colleagues:

You would see another portfolio here and another portfolio in another kindergarten. You would see another portfolio in other city. (Andrea)

When I first heard about it, I wondered what’s all the fuss about. We were always giving children’s work back to children. Children could always see their work. We discussed it with colleagues and we couldn’t see the difference. They gave us some good ideas, for example [drawing a human figure every month] but the rest [of what they said] we are still not convinced that is suitable for young children. (Antigoni)

We had a seminar at some point, [organized] by the School Advisor but you could tell that she didn’t know much either. Some of them [School Advisors] don’t even like the portfolio themselves, so colleagues in other areas don’t have to do it. So at the end not only you don’t know what to do but you also don’t know why you are you doing it for. (Konstantina)

Andrea, a teacher of 16 years experience, astutely explained how a lack of shared understandings mediated teachers’ interpretation of curriculum guidelines and led to a situation where individual understandings eventually overwhelmed the intended curriculum:
From then on, in practice, when one understands it in one way and the other in another way, and one implements it like that and the other like this and when even those who are, let’s say, superior to us and their role is to say ‘you will do it like that’, have different views, then we move into how each one of us will ‘read’ [what the curriculum says about the portfolio], how each one of us will understand it and how each one of us will implement it.

As the literature indicates, in times of confusion some teachers tend to turn to familiar practices as a way of alleviating their stress (O’Sullivan, Carroll, & Cavanagh, 2008). Others may end up with “false clarity”, that is, think that they have changed, but “in actuality they have only assimilated the superficial trappings of the new practice” (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 35). Fifteen years after the introduction of the current early childhood curriculum the teachers of the sample reported using a combination of closed-ended worksheets, incidental observation and “light versions” of the student portfolio (e.g. with “6 or 7 things children have done’) for the assessment of young children’s learning. Their accounts suggest that actual assessment practices are very different from those envisaged by curriculum developers:

We do a light version. We put assignments in a folder and at the end of the year children take it home. Sometimes I jot down what children tell me they are doing. That’s all. (Aliki)

Confusion may also lead to or increase teachers’ sense of disconnect between policy-making and teaching. Six teachers’ expressed this disconnection through words of “resistance”:

They should tell us what to do. When they find out themselves, they should tell us what to do. Till then I will be doing what I already do (Ioanna)

Do they want me to use the portfolio? They should force me. All of us though. But first, they need to convince me that they know what they are talking about (Konstantina). 

**Fifteen years later: “at the end of the day nobody is checking”**

As teachers discussed how they constructed their understanding of the student portfolio through interactions with colleagues and School Advisors, their accounts also offered insights into how their relationship with the curriculum was “invisibly but indelibly” (Ingersoll, 2006, p. 4) shaped by the policy context within which they worked.

Teachers’ answers suggested that they perceive the guidelines on the use of the student portfolio as non-binding guidance. This view seemed to be linked to a perception of the national curriculum as non “compulsory” (or “binding”) and a view of curricula for young children as the epitome of teacher autonomy. As Lidia said,

I think that in our work, nothing is compulsory with the narrow sense of the term. That is, each kindergarten teacher takes basic things from the curriculum and she works on them with a very special, individual way, each one of us uses different methods and approaches topics differently. I mean there isn’t a section in the curriculum that gives basic instructions, step by step instructions about what to do. That is, we are flexible.

This lack of “step by step” instructions in the curriculum seems to be interpreted by teachers as meaning that nothing on the national curriculum is compulsory. The argument about the way the curriculum “is written” or “phrased” came up more than
once confirming that the language and wording of the curriculum document (e.g. its insufficient specificity) play a critical role in teachers’ interpretation of the curriculum (Priestley, Minty, & Eager, 2014). They may, for example, imply that some parts or aspects of the curriculum are “just” theoretical. In participants’ words:

The way [the curriculum] is phrased, doesn’t force you to follow it. The same thing applies to the portfolio. (Elpida)

The kindergarten program is anyway flexible, so nobody forces you to do [the portfolio] …

I can’t tell whether there is something specific about the portfolio in the curriculum, is there? It is mentioned generally, isn’t it? It [CTCF] doesn’t analyze it, does it? (Olga)

Teachers debated the non-compulsory nature of the guidelines on the use of the student portfolio also on the basis of the messages they got from their interactions with their professional contexts. Drawing on what they perceive is happening around them, 18 teachers inferred that the use of student portfolio is left to individual judgement because of “the way things are” and the “fact” that “every teacher is actually doing what she [sic] wants and nobody says anything” (Irini). In their words,

I believe that it is left to individual judgment. And at the end of the day who is checking whether you use it or not? (Lambrini)

I believe it’s left up to us to decide. If it was compulsory we will all do it. We will all implement it, but we don’t. (Rita)

When I had my first seminar on portfolio I was given the impression that it is mandatory. From then on, as the years passed by and talking to other teachers I realized that it is not. (Tania)

Tania was one of the seven participants who acknowledged that since the portfolio approach is “officially mentioned” in the national curriculum – which is “normally/in reality compulsory” or “by rule binding” – teachers are “obliged to implement it”. Yet, they were all quick to shift the discussion to the realities of their classroom in order to explain why they do not use it as intended. Structural factors like group size, ratios of teachers to children and classroom demographics were identified as the main constraining dynamics. Teachers’ references to their working conditions seemed to bring out more negative emotions and reluctance than other arguments, confirming the point that the working conditions under which curriculum changes have to be implemented also play an influential role in teachers’ response to change (Kelchtermans, 2005). For example:

Normally, if it’s in the curriculum we are obliged to do it. But it is difficult to implement it properly because we have too many children. So we can only do it in a superficial way. (Athanasia).

Look, if it is in the CTCF, we have to implement it. It’s the official curriculum after all. But let me tell you about the children in my classroom. Most of them are from another country, they don’t even speak Greek. I don’t know what kind of portfolio I can do under these circumstances. Do those who wrote the curriculum know? (Sofia)

The last comment is also indicative of the frequently voiced perception that the guidelines about portfolio assessment were written by people who are not aware of the complex reality of Greek classrooms. Teachers’ complaints are consistent with another frequently voiced criticism of Greek education reforms: that curriculum change is designed with little consultation with teachers and other social actors (Flouris & Pasias, 2003, p. 84).
**Discussion**

The international research literature has repeatedly warned policymakers and teacher educators that “teachers close their doors and proceed to create within their classrooms an amalgam of teaching that carries their individual signature regardless of what the curriculum mandate is in the district or state” (Hawthorne, 1992, p. x, as cited in Edwards, 2011). Although they are not the focus of this paper, teachers’ conceptions about knowledge, teaching and the role of assessment in early years learning, as revealed in their accounts, need to be acknowledged as a factor that shapes participants’ translation and enactment of curriculum guidelines on assessment. Teacher biography and history are additional contributing factors. For example, teachers who had worked under the previous curriculum may, justifiably, lack the assessment literacy needed for enacting more contemporary (and admittedly more demanding) ways of assessing young children. While we recorded a striking homogeneity of views and practices among individuals with different sets of experiences we are aware that with a different analytical focus we could have delved further into how teachers’ biography and pedagogical beliefs interact with various factors to filter the prescribed curriculum.

Teachers’ accounts of their early experiences with the portfolio assessment guidelines suggest that both their relationship with and the meaning-making of the “new” curriculum were influenced by a variety of factors, over a period of time. Two of them stood out more clearly in our study: teachers’ professional contexts and teachers’ perceived decision-making space.

As intermediaries in policy implementation and key shapers of teachers’ professional contexts, School Advisors seems to have influenced teachers’ relationship with the curriculum in critical ways. Teachers’ accounts suggest that, from very early on, School Advisors have been implicitly assigned (not clear by whom) the role of the “reader” of the curriculum and the tasks of explaining its intentions, of “deciding and then announcing what must be done, what can be done, and what cannot” (Ball, Maguire, Braun & Hoskins, 2011, p. 626). Acting as sense makers of curriculum intentions, school advisors played an important role in how teachers interpreted and responded to the “new” assessment guidelines. For example, School Advisors’ disposition towards portfolio assessment was very often mentioned as a factor influencing teachers’ stance towards the new tool. Responsible for supporting teacher professional growth, School Advisors also mediated teachers’ curriculum meaning-making at the social interactions level. During the first critical years of curriculum change, faced with new concepts and pedagogical principles, participants turned to their colleagues to help them make sense of the practical details of portfolio assessment implementation. Our data show that without School Advisors’ professional support to guide this collective sense-making the “shared, local meanings” proliferated misunderstandings of curriculum intentions (Coburn, 2001; Penuel, Fishman, Gallagher, Korbak, & Lopez-Prado, 2009, p. 659).

Another influential factor in shaping their relationship with the mandated curriculum appears to be teachers’ perceived decision-making space. Teachers indicated high levels of confidence in that they can continue using their current assessment practices until someone “convinces” them to do otherwise. Some teachers even seem to have constructed an identity, as “you can’t force me to do what I don’t want to do”. The “at the end of the day nobody’s checking” perspective also reflects the size of teachers’
perceived decision-making space. Teachers’ comments confirm that the system frame of Greek kindergarten allows teachers considerable freedom for interpretation and decision-making (Ball et al., 2012; Papatheodorou, 2010). As teachers draw from the contexts around them to form their readings and interpretations it is possible that absence of monitoring and systematic professional supervision has given them this “untroubled sense of decision-making autonomy” (Stickney, 2012, p. 658). In the same way, the vagueness and confusion they experienced during reform transition may have led teachers to believe that “at the end of the day” individual teachers are responsible for interpreting new situations independently. As the literature argues, a culture of teacher individualism may lead to teachers interpreting individualised autonomy as professional autonomy (Vangrieken, Grosemans, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2017).

Some implications for policymaking, teacher professional development and research

As Lundström (2015, p. 83) argues “perceived ‘truths’ about lived experience can be disputed, but they are still important for understanding policy enactment as well as professional action and development.”

Our findings add support to research that highlights how important professional learning is to interpreting curriculum (McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2013). Teachers need highly professionalised opportunities across the teacher education continuum to reflect on their understanding of the curriculum, think critically of their role as curriculum developers and decision-makers, and discuss curriculum development issues with their colleagues. Especially collective sense-making, which is often teachers’ first attempt to understand curriculum change or educational reform, needs structures and support that help teachers learn from each other and push their thinking forward (Coburn, 2001). Supporting collective sense-making in practice would mean that policy encourages a collective culture in kindergartens and supports both formal and informal social networks without however giving the message that collaboration is “mandated” (Coburn, 2001). This decentralised approach to professional development is also one of the recommendations made by OECD (2011, p. 32) to Greek policymakers and is consistent with the literature that posits that professional autonomy needs to “go hand in hand with collaborative, collegial communities of inquiry” (Webster-Wright, 2010, p. 46). The newly appointed Coordinators of Educational Work may play a significant role in this direction, as part of their duties is to encourage and support teacher collaboration within and across schools.

Emerging as a finding worth discussing at the policy context level is the role of School Advisors (or the more recent role of Coordinator of Educational Work) in teachers’ understanding and construction of the official curriculum. As part of the social space surrounding curriculum reform and enactment (Hardy, 2015, p. 78), these people seem to have played a critical role in how teachers interpreted and responded to the intended curriculum. While most School Advisors work hard to put the mandated policies into practice (Ball et al., 2012) it is important for policymakers to remember that people assigned the role of supporting teachers in curriculum enactment have their own sense-making schemas and promote their own interpretations of policy intentions (for example, in relation to curricular autonomy) (Ball et al., 2012).
These people also enact different roles within policy work, some of them given by the teachers under their charge and others of their own choice. Teachers’ experiences in this study suggest that School Advisors (or CEW) have a more influential role as policy actors than has been acknowledged in the Greek context so far (Vozaitis & Ifanti, 2017). Examining their intermediary role in policy networks and policy enactment is a way to study the connection between macro-level policies and micro-level practices.

Finally, one more implication of the study is that it raises questions about the “kinds of teacher subjects” Greek policy has “produced” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 6). If, as Ball et al. (2012, p. 6) argue, teachers are not the only one who makes sense of policy but policy also makes sense of teachers – “makes them what and who they are in the school and the classroom” – then research needs to explore how different variables interact to affect kindergarten teachers’ perceptions on important issues such as professional autonomy and epistemic agency. For example, data indicate that the teachers of the sample have ceded responsibility for professional learning to School Advisors. One explanation could lie in the fact that Greek teachers are accustomed to a centrally led approach to professional guidance and development (OECD, 2011). It is possible that this long-standing culture of state provision shapes teachers’ interpretation of professional development as externally located. Studies that shed light on such questions could contribute to Greek education’s “struggle” to define accountability in productive ways.

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