

# Constructing the Identity of the European Citizen in Early Childhood Education in Greece: Problems and Particularities



**Alexandros Dagkas**

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki - Greece

adagkas@nured.auth.gr

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## Résumé

Ce travail traite des sujets liés à la formation des enseignants de l'école maternelle en Grèce. Il se centre sur l'intervention éducative pour la promotion d'un cadre capable de combiner l'identité de citoyen avec les droits sociaux de l'homme. Au niveau de la méthode, le sujet en considération s'oriente vers deux questions. La première concerne la définition des concepts de « citoyen » et de « droits ». Il y a des difficultés inévitables associées au sens. Les concepts de « citoyen » et de « droits » ont-ils la même signification pour tout le monde ? Des usages différents de ces termes entraînent des perceptions opposées, qui peuvent rejoindre les tendances dominantes dans tous les pays de l'Union Européenne. Cette élucidation forme la base pour la définition des situations auxquelles sont confrontés les enseignants de la maternelle quant aux concepts de « citoyen » et de « droits » dans l'Union Européenne. En conséquence, les enseignants de la maternelle doivent prendre la responsabilité de transmettre les idées appropriées à leurs élèves. Le deuxième problème révèle des particularités spécifiques liées aux circonstances sociales en Grèce. L'observation intensive de ces situations devrait incorporer une description de l'évolution générale dans ce pays, tout développement, effectué au niveau des droits, inclus. En effet, les dilemmes posés par la promotion d'une identité Européenne aux élèves de la maternelle devrait être confrontée avec une référence à cette description et particulièrement, par rapport à l'éducation.

**Mots-clés :** maternelle, citoyen, droits, formation des enseignants

## Construire l'identité du citoyen européen en éducation préscolaire en Grèce: Problèmes et particularités

## Abstract

The present study deals with issues related to the training of kindergarten teachers in Greece. It focuses on educational intervention for the promotion of a framework which will be apt to combine European civic identity with the social rights of man. Methodologically, the subject under consideration revolves around two questions. The first one involves defining the concepts of "citizen" and "rights". There are inevitable difficulties associated with semantics. Do "citizen" and "rights" mean the same things to everyone? Different uses of these words result in conflicting perceptions, which can be traced in approaches constituting dominant trends in all countries of the European Union. This clarification forms a basis for defining the issues that kindergarten teachers are facing with regard to the content of the concepts of "citizen" and "rights" in the

European Union. Thus, kindergarten teachers must then undertake the responsibility of transmitting the relevant ideas to their pupils in the kindergarten. The second problem identifies specific particularities related with social circumstances in Greece. Extensive examination of these issues has to incorporate a description of the general social evolution in this country, including all developments being realized in the area of rights. Thereby, the dilemmas posed by the promotion of a European identity to preschoolers must be confronted with reference to this description and, particularly, with regard to education.

**Keywords:** kindergarten, citizen, rights, teacher training

## Introduction

### 1. The concepts of “citizen” and “rights” in the European Union

Fundamental values in the western world are enjoying today less protection than in the past. Regressive developments, owed to the conservative shift of societies, and disorientation being observed in politics, education, and culture, resulted in reduced vigilance of public opinion, and to a non awakening of citizens’ conscience, face to issues related to the progressive values (Kubow - Karras, 2011).

If we would enter in a discussion of the concept of “citizenship”, we would be previously obliged to offer a connotation of the concept within the framework of European tradition and culture, as these elements exist as a product of European enlightenment. Within this structure, the concept of “citizenship” is linked with the meaning of fundamental rights and of social rights, as well as with the fact of the increase of the social deficit (i.e. the inadequate social consciousness and social awareness).

In this case, we are observing that, with the deprivation of people of their basic rights, to a full extent in Europe, the social deficit is being increased. In recent years, the proposals put forward concerning the future of social rights have caused a striking regression of the values propagated into the society in comparison with those forwarded by the international community in the aftermath of the Second World War. At that time, under the pressure of public opinion, of the turn of voters to radical sociopolitical forces and of the support of working people to the labor movement, significant transformations were adopted, inscribed in the United Nations Charter of 1945. Beside freedom and equality, other rights neglected until then (the right to work, the rights of free health and education, the right of participation to the distribution of wealth) were assigned as fundamental. On the contrary, in the age of globalization, and following the unbelievable adjustments in economy, social life and politics, the social rights - recognized before 50 years as fundamental rights - were cancelled. Ironically, we observe that, in the historical period from the French revolution of 1789 until now, a vicious

circle is taking place with regard to the maintaining of human values and expansion of human rights. Liberty and equality, values of the French Revolution, are exclusively recognized as fundamental rights, yet not fully established (this is true), with the international community being called by every state government to take action for their defense. On the other hand, the right to work is being portrayed as an “advanced right” (that means a right of second grade, left for further consideration). Not a word, of course, is being spoken any more for a fair distribution of social wealth, taking into account the hard times of world economy being tormented by a centralization of wealth (and seizure of power by a handful of capital possessors) and by the accumulation of capital by dispossession (Harvey, 2003).

The dialogue, evolved, in each European Union country, within the communities - imagined (national) or not (academic communities) - exposes the diversity of views, either moral or scientific, being spread underneath, in the milieu of people. On this matter, Greece appears fomenting various trends that differ with others emerging in Western Europe countries.

## **2. Social education and scientific training of kindergarten teachers**

In early childhood education, there are programs that aim to the socialization of kindergarten children. Through various activities, the framework of education offered to them intends to create individuals sensitive to the social problems that we discussed above, to the decline of social rights and to the increase of social deficit (OECD, 2001, 2006). The children are exposed to the values prevailing around them, among people succumbed to the dictations of neoliberalism, the triumphant ideology of the 21st century (Brooker - Broadbent, 2003). A shield is needed for the non-alignment of their education with the calamitous trends in adult society. In this point, the involvement of kindergarten teachers in the propagation of social rights to their pupils will contribute to a drawback of social deficit (UNESCO, 2007).

When the kindergarten teacher is critically explaining to its audience - the kindergarten children - citizenship as a social factor, he helps them being stimulated with its properties, both negative and positive. But, for a critical approach of citizenship, the kindergarten teachers need to be educated and trained themselves, socially and scientifically. The requirement for bringing into the light social issues and make kindergarten children acquainted with human rights is the construction of a social attentiveness of their tutor. The kindergarten teacher has to acquire knowledge and skills for handling questions referring to relations between people, be it relations of production or others of a similar content (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, 2004). Filling gaps in his understanding of historical fluctuations of public response on

fundamental rights is a prerequisite. If he becomes an expert on “citizenship” teaching, in fact in questions of class structure of society, he turns into the role of an emissary of messages which will slowly but surely create a response in the conscience of his pupils for defending, in their future life, the values of society.

### 3. Social education and scientific training exploitation

The first step, in the pedagogical sciences’ studies, is to make students accustomed to topics of social education (Tsigilis, Tsioumis, Gregoriadis, 2007). Then, kindergarten teachers will be ready to communicate to the pupils their sensitivities. The base of this procedure is constituted by the acquired knowledge of educators in the fields of child psychology and pedagogy, of teaching of history to children, of other cognitive subjects.

The mental state of children, with its specific development, is a parameter that is being considered by kindergarten teachers. Knowledge is necessary about the limits, in the mind of children, of understanding of each event associated with social and economic factors and of its proper interpretation (Hansen, 2011). The particular experience in the mind of children, required for compiling an abstract understanding, in their future adult life, of the society surrounding them, will be shaped by their contact with those social characteristics which imply class distinctions in the human masses into the society and formulate the social deficits. The social environment, created by opposing social fields, constructs into the children’s memory images, which match to elements of everyday life; when in a later stage of emotional and mental maturity they will have the power of rational thought, they will decipher the organization of society and its order. Although this is impossible during early childhood, since children still live their egocentric phase of biological development, a base layer is constructed. Isolated elements with common features will be identified by kindergarten children, when able, as parts of structures and will be interpreted as components of social relations between people.

In the kindergarten, teachers may set up an educational program, which, composed by specific activities, will be capable of stirring up pupils’ attentiveness regarding sensitive social issues (Tsigilis, Tsioumis, Gregoriadis, 2006). The historical gains, in the *longue durée* of the social system, which constitute the essence of European progress and culture; will be the framework of formation of social awareness in children’s conscience. Children will adopt a social and cultural model, in favor of which they will fight, later, if it is abused.

#### 4. Problems and particularities in early childhood education in Greece

The ideological choices in the social system in Greece, when in need of reproduction, presuppose a State mechanism disposing a sophisticated function. This is the case of the creation of the identity of the European citizen in this country. In early childhood education, the situation is illustrated by the intensification of old problems; institutional and practical difficulties obstruct the support of the European ideals. The most important questions are:

- *The pre-school education curriculum has various weak points, mostly inherent.*
- *Kindergarten teachers receive an education which can be described as non homogeneous and as insufficient (Doliopoulou, 2010b).*
- *The determination for a promotion of the concept of an all-day early childhood education is not fulfilling a precondition for the education of kindergarten children. It simply engenders from the social necessities of families; parents working excessively need a place to park their children (Doliopoulou, 2010a).*
- *The trend regarding the number of children in classrooms is described as being in constant increase.*
- *None or insufficient effort is being noticed for a program containing activities which may introduce the children to critical questions referring to the economy or social evolution or politics.*

In an attempt to describe the Greek particularities, one may find out that, in relation to the arrangement of the national educational system in conformity with the Bologna directives, it is a country with a very low performance, compared to other members of the European Union. The main particularity is the insistence in cultural identity remaining unchanged. Greek people, among them the educators, resist against assimilation policies incorporated in the European Union directives. It is about an effect generated by the country's historical evolution of cultural tradition, which reinforces the existing idiosyncrasies.

The national cultural tradition, and its offspring, the present cultural identity of Greeks, is in harmony with the economic, social, political, cultural and other evolutions during the past; it is also in conflict with the trends created by the tremendous changes occurring after the collapse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century world system and by the imposition of neoliberal choices.

#### **4.1. Economic changes**

The sociopolitical changes in a worldwide scale and the new status quo of the 21<sup>th</sup> century globalization affected the lives of people of all nations. Nevertheless, the Greeks keep on preserving most of the peculiarities and eccentricities of the past in the economic, social and cultural sphere. Recently, due to the economic crisis, crucial changes in social behaviors are visible.

#### **4.2. Social changes**

The current sweeping changes in the Greek economy have affected the happiness and comfort of people. The everyday survival still relies - although with some noticeable changes - on traditional relations, on the traditional family ties and other relations within the broader social environment of the local community and of the neighborhood.

#### **4.3. Cultural changes**

Resistance to poverty is revitalizing the traditional cultural identity with positive messages of solidarity. The nationalist and religious sentiment is being reinforced, in some cases provoking deviations to chauvinism.

### **5. Questions of conscience and cultural identity**

The thread, which is linking the education of kindergarten teachers and kindergarten children with the above developments, consists in the formulation of a progressive conscience through the reservation of the constructive components of Greek cultural identity. A national cultural model, enriched with positive elements of European tradition, will contribute to the making of a plan of exit from the crisis and of national salvation. The Greek educational system has to offer solutions to the question of social orientation of kindergarten teaching. Pupils must comprehend that the world is not still; it is flowing. The assimilation of Greeks to European culture, with the adoption of its positive facets, presupposes the acceptance of an attitude of conforming to social change and the overcoming of Greek cultural peculiarities. The pupils must feel familiarized with the prospect of change. A simultaneous effect pattern is equally distinct: small children have uncritical, benevolent images of political authority figures, but that idealization erodes steadily during elementary school years (Karatasos et al., 2007).

Since the educational strategy is being clarified according to the above-mentioned orientation, the State has to create the mechanism for its implementation. In this point

lies the ineffectiveness of kindergarten teachers. Any improvement in the teaching of the social character of the question of “citizenship” is demanding an efficient professional human potential, which does not exist. It is only some reforms in superstructure, limited cultural changes that attract the attention of educators. With reference to the question of “citizenship”, there is a general conviction - which can also be corroborated from the personal experience of the author of this study - that the promotion of this issue by the kindergarten teachers is being implemented with allusion to general social aspects only, especially those pertaining to civic education, instead of the social parameters.

The social deficit traced in the field of kindergarten education is being avoided by various means. There is a possibility of development of personal efforts of teachers. Prohibitive burdens, stemming from incomplete training, from individual culture or from hostile prejudice, are related with the efficiency of these measures. On a second level, institutional measures, including public education and scientific training, are apt for the improvement of teaching skills of educators. At the onset of the twenty-first century, the political lives of children are the object of practical and scientific interest. In the social context, the state is regarded as an unreliable protector. It is evident that children may have to devise strategies of survival. Children evolve as moral beings by learning to value and care for others and in this way the nation’s politics can impact significantly on their understandings and the way that they live their lives (Vamvakidou, 2006).

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