

# Early Childhood Education and Care Services in Greece

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**Abstract-** The purpose of this study is to investigate the availability of early childhood education and care centers for children under three of the age in Greece. According to the typology of Espring-Andersen, Greece belongs to the Mediterranean welfare model, where “familism” is the main component of social structure, which. This model has family as the primary focus of social solidarity (provision of care and support) and productivity (economic activity within family businesses).

**Keywords—** Social policy, Social welfare models, “Familism”, Day care centers, Greece.

## I. Introduction

Early childhood care is intricately connected to family characteristics, welfare policies and labor market opportunities. European countries have been grouped into family policy models by Espring-Andersen, where early childhood education and care services are divided into:

- The Nordic model, which is permeated by the idea of sharing children's education and care between family and public institutions. Day care is a central aspect of modern childhood and the value system, where many parents assume that public institutions are suitable for the education of young children (Alasuutari, 2003). In this case, the care for young children is uniformly organized for all preschoolers (unitary model). The universal right of access from very young age is clearly guaranteed in the countries that have the unitary model.

- The Anglo-Saxon model focuses on supporting the poor, single-parent and disadvantaged families. Being at the opposite end from the Nordic model, it minimizes the state's participation basing itself on the labor market. The services are structured according to the age of the children (normally for children aged 0-3 years and children aged 3-6 years). Each type of service can belong to different ministries and have staff with different skills (split model).

- The Central European model contains services that are structured according to the age of the children, where the splitting of services prevails, similarly to the Anglo-Saxon model. A basic characteristic of this system is the support of families regardless of income and position, promoting traditional family roles. The services are funded by the contributions of employees and provide multiple forms of financial support, including tax benefits and generous subsidies. These countries tend to provide

universal access to preschool education for older children (3 years old to school age), but ignore children under 3 years old. These states tend to provide long parental leave for women, encourage women with children to stay at home or work part time.

- The Southern European or Mediterranean model, that Greece has adopted, resembles the Central European model on the traditional role played by the family, but is characterized by a residual welfare system, which offers meagre allowances. Both the split and the unitary model coexist (Thévenon, 2011). One of its basic components is the familistic welfare model, the type of national political economy, where the family plays a double role as the key provider of social assistance to its members and as a key agent in the reproduction of its politico-economic institutional arrangements (Ferrera, 2010). The familistic welfare model differs from that of Central Europe because is not bounded by the narrow limits of the nuclear family, but refers to an extensive network of relatives which provides a mechanism for gathering and redistributing resources and care among its members (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013).

In Greece, early childhood education and care services (ECEC) for children under 3 is represented only by “day care centers/nurseries or crèche”<sup>1</sup>. The day care centers are run by the private (for-profit) and public (through municipalities for profit and nonprofit) sector. Municipalities' day care centers come under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior and admit children from the age of 6 months up to 2 ½ years. The Ministry of Health and Welfare is mainly responsible for the private day care centers and admit children from the age of 2 months up to 2 ½ years. Priority for registration is given to children of working parents or to those from families with many children, to orphans, to those from needy or single-parent families, to children of unmarried mothers, of divorced or separated parents, of parents with physical or mental disabilities. The board of directors of each center, together with members of the municipality, can decide to charge some monthly fees according to the financial condition of the families of the children.

<sup>1</sup> The terms “nursery”, “crèche”, “day care centre” are used as synonymous concerning the early childhood education and care services for children under 3 in Greece.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the availability of early childhood education and care centers for children under three of the age in Greece. According to the typology of Esping-Andersen, Greece belongs to the Mediterranean welfare model, where "familism" is the main component of social structure, which. This model has family as the primary focus of social solidarity (provision of care and support) and productivity (economic activity within family businesses) (Ferrera, 2010. OECD, 2007. Janta, 2013. Esping-Andersen, 2002).

### Research assumption

Considering that Greece has adopted the Mediterranean model, which has strong familistic nature and is characterized by close family relations, the availability of early childhood education and care centers is expected to be limited. Therefore, the state does not prioritize the provision of services for this age group (Ferrera, 2010. OECD, 2007. Janta, 2013).

## II. Method

### A. Participants and setting

The research was carried in day care centers in Northern Greece. The sample included all officially authorized municipal and private centers with children under 3 years old. The total number of day care centers was 251. Of those, 139 were in Thessaloniki and 112 in the country. In the total of 251 day care centers 2837 infants were accommodated.

### B. Data collection process

To investigate the level of social policy in day care centers in Greece and compare them with those in the European Union, data were collected from organizations and institutions in Europe and Greece. More specifically, those organizations are the European Commission Childcare Network, Eurydice,

NESSE, European Council, European Parliament, the OECD, UNESCO and EUROSTAT. Furthermore, data on Greek day care centers were gathered from ELSTAT, KEDKE and by studying the laws governing preschool services.

For the selection of private and municipal day care centers for profit to participate in the study, the official list of registered day care centers was taken from the Welfare Offices of each prefecture. The list of municipal day care centers was retrieved from each municipality as there was no official list in the Ministry of Interior.

## III. Results

According to the research assumption, a lack of availability of day care centers was expected. In order to identify their availability, the number of applications to day care centers and the acceptance rate of these applications were requested by municipalities. It was not possible to obtain reliable information because neither the municipal services nor the relevant Ministry keeps official records of these applications.

The research was carried out in 2018. Considering that the children who attended day care centers in this study were born in the year 2015, it was attempted to estimate the availability of these services using the data of our research and the total number of children born in this year in Northern Greece. The total number of births in this area in the year 2015 was 21,189. Since the infants involved were of 8 to 30 months of age, the maximum number of infants was calculated by doubling the number of births in 2015, reaching a total number of 42,378 (ELSTAT, 2015).

Table 1 presents the number of births in 2015 and the number of infants that were enrolled in child care centers in Northern Greece during the period of this study.

**Table 1:** Number of children attending day care centers as a percentage of the total number of infants in Northern Greece

REGION	PREFECTURE	BIRTHS IN 2015	ESTIMATED NUMBER OF INFANTS	NUMBER OF DAYCARE CENTRES	NUMBER OF INFANTS	PERCENTAGE %
	Drama	675	1350	7	64	4.74
	Kavala	1013	2026	26	330	16.29
	Evros	1203	2406	9	90	3.74
	Hanthi	1098	2196	3	26	1.18
	Rodopi	791	1582	4	28	1.77
<b>Eastern Macedonia - Thrace</b>		4780	9560	49	538	5.63
	Imathia	996	1992	13	120	6.02
	Thessaloniki	9145	18290	139	1618	8.85
	Kilkis	499	998	2	25	2.51
	Pella	1013	2026	6	58	2.86
	Pieria	973	1946	9	100	5.15
	Serres	984	1968	17	209	10.62
	Halkidiki	813	1626	4	45	2.77
<b>Central Macedonia</b>		14423	28846	190	2175	7.54
	Grevena	147	294	3	25	8.50
	Kastoria	334	668	5	64	9.58
	Kozani	1134	2268	4	35	1.54
	Florina	371	742	0	0	0.00
<b>Western Macedonia</b>		1986	3972	12	124	3.12
<b>Total</b>		21189	42378	251	2837	6.69

It can be seen from the table above those places in day care centers in Northern Greece cover about 6.7% of the total number of infants. If there was universal demand for preschool education and day care centers, as it happens with kindergarten classes, only 6.7% of the number of children would be covered by them. Apart from the small number of places, there are some prefectures that offer no day care centers.

#### IV. Discussion

According to the research assumption, the number of available places in day care centers was expected to be insufficient for covering the maximum potential demand, as Greece belongs to the Mediterranean model which is characterized by close family relations. In this study, the calculation of the sufficiency of nurseries was done by counting the number of available places in North Greece and the total number of infants in these regions. The result showed that existing nurseries could only cover 6.7% of the total infant population if there was universal demand for early education and care centers.

According to the typology established earlier, Greece belongs to the Mediterranean welfare model that is characterized by its strong family focus, where the roles are shared across an extensive network of relatives that redistribute resources among them (Ferrera, 2010). On a daily basis, the family home is the place where care and support services are redistributed and are exchanged among its members, such as older people, children and unmarried members (Kohli & Albertini, 2008. Poggio, 2008). Focusing on Greece, the vast majority of the Greek economy is traditionally dominated by small family businesses. Families often function as employers to their members, either on a permanent or occasional basis, providing them with primary or secondary jobs (Institute of Small Enterprises, 2011. ELSTAT, 2012).

This may explain the complete lack of public and private day care centers in 7 out of 16 prefectures studied. For example, the prefecture of Florina had no day care centers, which could be due to the majority of the population being employed in family agricultural and fur production businesses. The same applies to the prefecture of Halkidiki, where apart from agriculture the economy is based on small family hotels. Another contributing factor to the lack of available nursery places is the existence of an extensive network of relatives and especially grandparents. In all EU Member States, grandparents are the most common source of informal childcare (Glaser et al 2013. Jappens & Van Bavel 2012. Rutter & Evans, 2011). Grandparents taking up the role of caregivers arise from two main factors: (1) the lack of formal care and (2) the values and attitudes towards childcare prevailing in this type of society. In many European countries that lack investment in formal childcare, the only possible way for parents to enter the labor market is getting help from grandparents (Herlofson & Hagestad 2012), and grandparents are more likely to help with childcare if

there are no alternative options or support from the state (Igel & Szydlik, 2011). According to Mills et al. (2013), in Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Italy more than half of the children under the age of 3 receive informal childcare, while in countries such as Norway, Finland and Sweden, only a small minority receives informal childcare. Intensive and systematic care is more prevalent in Mediterranean countries. For example, in Spain 20% of grandparents provide childcare almost daily, compared with just 2% in Holland. Focusing on Greece, the lack of formal day care centers can be attributed to the existence of close family relations, which allows parents to rely on the help of relatives. The reason for seeking help within the network of relatives may be due, either to the lack of formal structures, or the perceptions of parents that the family looking after infants is preferable, so parents have no interest on the existence of formal childcare. Another possible reason for the lack of developmental appropriateness of infant and toddler child care may be that infants and toddlers are generally viewed as being too young to respond to educational activities. In addition, Greece belongs to Mediterranean model, sharing a cultural emphasis on mothers' role and presence in early childhood years, strong family ties and high reliance on the extended family for supporting childcare needs (Saraceno, 2000). Respectively, from the state's point of view, not creating formal childcare services may be due to the lack of demand from parents or the strong family relations that allow not prioritizing the creation of services for this age group, considering the high cost of establishing and maintaining childcare services.

Formal early childhood education and care in Greece is provided in separate settings. The two types of institutions are typical of the split management approach. The division between "education" and "care" may have its roots in the history of Greece education system but it is also a reflection of the policies that the state has adopted or not for early education. Public child care services, especially for children under 3 years, still are not considered enough to fulfill the demand and grandparents are the most common source of childcare.

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