
SCHOOL AND PATERNAL COLLABORATION IN GREEK EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: PILOT UTILISATION OF THE SYNEducational MODEL

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to investigate common educational experiences of fathers and children in an early childhood setting by means of the model of *Syneducation* as a collaborative action study (Kekes, 2000; Mylonakou-Keke, 2019). A total of 10 sessions of fathers' visits in a Greek early childhood centre (4- to 6-year-old children) during a four-month period were implemented and evaluated. The fathers participated and contributed in the development of various *syneducational* actions that ranged from the simple *syneducation* of parents with children, to the systematic participation of children and adults in research and projects' development. *Syneducational* actions were created, constructed and supported by digital tools (email communication between the teachers and the parents, the use of Padlet as a diary and a communication platform during the implementation and a Google folder for sharing photos and videos from the project). The creative exploitation of technology led to the development of new ideas in an interactive learning environment for children and fathers. The study contributes generally to the field of school and family cooperation as interdependent systems.

Keywords: model of syneducation, early childhood, young children, school-paternal collaboration, kindergarten, father-child relationship

Introduction

One of the most popular research themes for early childhood education researchers is school-family collaboration. It is generally stated that the success of the educational process depends on the reciprocal collaboration of school and family, focusing on parental involvement in their child's education (Epstein, 1994; Epstein et al., 2009; Clinton & Hattie, 2013; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Taylor 2004). Some of the positive implications of this collaboration are increased achievement levels as well as different educational opportunities (LaRocque et al., 2011; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017). A recent meta-analysis revealed the positive associations of multiple forms of parents' involvement with multiple dimensions of adjustment among children across development (Barger et al., 2019).

According to Fishel and Ramirez (2005, p. 371), "*parent involvement is the participation of significant caregivers, including parents, grandparents, stepparents, foster parents, etc., in activities promoting*

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the educational process of their children in order to promote their academic and social well-being". Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) have classified parental involvement into three major types: behavioural involvement, cognitive-intellectual involvement, and personal involvement. Behavioural involvement covers two aspects. Firstly, the school-related activities that take place at school and parents contribute by taking part in them merely as visitors, e.g. parent-teacher meetings. Secondly, the activities that take place at home and focus on parental contributions in the completion of homework. Cognitive-intellectual involvement refers to the exposure to intellectually stimulating activities that parents engage in with their children such as reading together or discussing current events. Finally, the third type of parental involvement focuses on the parents' keeping informed of their child's behaviour at school or projects that the child is working on at school. The most usual type is behavioural involvement and one of the most important factors that generally supports this type of involvement are the school practices designed to organise it (Overstreet et al., 2005). A vast amount of prior research on parental involvement focused on the family participation in school-based activities, as well as the communication type between educators and parents and the homework monitoring or tutoring (El Nokali et al., 2010; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Lareau, 1987; Larocque et al., 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2005). Practically, family involvement may be implemented by taking part in a plethora of activities such as:

(a) volunteering at school; (b) helping children with their homework; (c) attending school functions; (d) visiting the child's classroom; (e) sharing expertise or experience with the class through guest speaking and finally; (f) taking on leadership roles in the school and participating in the decision-making process. (Larocque et al., 2011, p. 116; emphasis added)

However, Epstein (2001, 2002, 2010) and Sanders (2002, p. 31) introduced the "*school, family, and community partnership*" as an emerging paradigm and framework with a broader scope and a more holistic perspective. The school-family partnership models examined the relations between families, educators, and children and the ways that these factors support the children's learning (Downer & Meyers, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Jaynes, 2014; Moorman et al., 2012). This holistic paradigm forced the educators, as well as the researchers, to rethink their contribution in the enhancement of parental involvement using the broad school-family partnership approach. The structure of school and family relationships based on activities taking place into school area was shifted focusing on the socialisation among all the members of the school community.

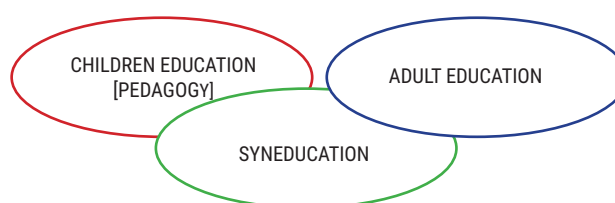
Educators' attitudes towards parental involvement have been studied by various research (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Flakes, 2007; Walker et al., 2010) and their findings revealed that most of the teachers have a positive attitude towards parental involvement, emphasizing the important role of their communication with the parents. Other research has shown that, in most cases, school-family relations operate unidirectionally, namely, from school to parents (Blândul, 2012; Llamas & Tuazon, 2016); even though parents tend to seek guidance from the teachers with their children's schoolwork (Flakes, 2007).

Thus, in order to reach out to families, educators make efforts to provide them with the support they need to feel welcome and confident to become more active in school decision making (Sanders & Epstein, 2005; Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014).

The school is responsible for conducting programmes that involve parents in order not only to optimize the educational partnership between school and family, but in general, to cooperate with the entire community (Blândul, 2012; Nicola, 2000). Prior research showed that intervention programs that increased parents' involvement so as to enhance children's learning in some subjects (e.g., math), achieved simultaneously children's adjustment in a variety of contexts (Berkowitz et al., 2015; Reynolds & Ou, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2019). Moreover, the enhancement of parental knowledge about school's teaching methods and children's learning outcomes encourages the parents' perception about their contribution in their child's education at home following the school's paradigm (Nitecki, 2015). Recent research revealed that when parents are guided during preschool, they can help their children and feel satisfied by their interaction and cooperation (Mas et al., 2020; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017).

Given that schools aim to devise ways to increase parental involvement, the model of “*Syneducation (synergy + education)*” (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005) seems a promising scientific field. Based on the socio-pedagogical approach, syneducation is defined as “*the acquisition of a common educational experience, simultaneously and in cooperation, of persons differing in age and cognitive infrastructure and often in social and cultural level*” (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005, p. 74)(see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Syneducation: A new emerging scientific field (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005, 74).



The socio-pedagogical approach seeks a “shift” from the usual isolated activities of individuals or groups towards organised synergies, which form strong collaborative networks and which in addition produce social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Cohen & Prusak, 2001). Family-school communication and cooperation, as any other social relationship, depends on the larger social context. According to Lareau (1987), “[a]cceptance of a particular type of family-school relationship emerges as the result of social processes” (p. 74; emphasis added).

Thus, school, family and community relations emphasize organised and effective cooperation with each other (Mylonakou-Keke, 2015, 2019). All participants are treated as interactive systems, creating a strong and collaborative network between them, which functions as a “learning organisation” (Senge, 2006) and “learn” by using the *syneducational* model. Children and adults, even though they are individuals of different ages, should be exposed to situations that demand participation in a common educational experience and a collaborative action. These *syneducational* actions take place

in conditions of mutual understanding, negotiation, and “are facilitated through mutual mentoring” (Kekes & Mylonakou, 2006, p. 40). Parents and children can be trained simultaneously in fields that are new and unknown and this can be facilitated in an interactive learning environment. In this cooperative network, participants (adults and children) are constantly expanding their capabilities and create the results they really want.

The utilisation of the *syneducational* model materialised through projects that contained a variety of actions that took place among students, parents, teachers, representatives of the community and policy makers (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005, 2007). Within these *syneducational* projects, the starting point was the exploration of several issues through the collaboration of school, family, and the community. Thus, every *syneducational* programme involves a thematic unit which is decided and planned among the participants according to their interests and needs (Kekes & Mylonakou, 2007; Mylonakou-Keke, 2012). The application of this model aims to change participants’ attitudes or behaviours towards the specific matters that the thematic unit explores. The starting point may be an initial state of possible disinterest in school involvement and the final state would be an active participation in common syneducational actions that results in facing and exploring specific issues.

The research results from the existing *syneducational* programmes supported positive perspectives of school and family cooperation in the most optimistic manner. Parents experienced the educational process from their child’s perspective, modifying their views for it. Some of the final conclusions focused on the parents’ improved relationships with their children and their increased empathy of their children’s need (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007; Mylonakou-Keke, 2012, 2019). Parents realized that actions which took place during the programmes could be incorporated within their family life, supporting the emotional and social development of their children as well as their school success (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007). As for the educators who played a crucial role in the development of the programmes, they stated that these experiences enriched their relationships with the parents (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007). It is important to clarify that *syneducational* programmes have only been implemented in high schools, therefore, the results concern high school children and their families.

Many different factors affect the kind and degree of parental involvement such as: parents’ social, academical, and psychological resources; their personal sense of efficacy and socialisation practices; their cultural, ethnic and religious identities, etc. (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Dusi, 2012). Generally, parental involvement in Greece is restricted to a more formal type of contribution. Parents’ participation is limited to the indirect support of the pedagogical purposes of the educational system and focuses on the communication with the school mainly through individual meetings with the teacher (Lazariadou & Gravani-Kassida, 2015). Other pieces of research showed that parents are interested to know more about kindergarten’s operation to offer their help and to cooperate with the teachers in various ways (Vassi et al., 2016). However, there is a reluctance on their part to participate in the educational process and favor their participation as

supporters or “partners” in activities organised by the kindergarten (Vassi et al., 2016; Samourkasidou, 2020).

Generally, Greek mothers, especially highly educated ones, are more actively involved in their children’s education compared both to less educated mothers and to the fathers (Mousourou, 2012; Styli & Michalopoulou, 2016; Vassi et al., 2016). Recent Greek research concerning the parents’ perceptions of their involvement in the school context pointed out the absence of active involvement of the fathers in the educational process (Samurkasidou, 2020). However, many of the fathers indirectly supported the involvement of their spouses, shouldering the responsibility of their children at home during the meeting hours (Samurkasidou, 2020). These findings are in line with other international studies surrounding school-focused parenting practices and greater maternal involvement compared to paternal (Muscott et al., 2008; Ricco et al., 2003; Roopnarine et al., 2006; Stright & Yeo, 2014).

Even though fathers are less involved than mothers in the education and caretaking of their young children, it is well documented that children are more likely to be successful in school if their fathers are involved (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Winquist-Nord, 1998). Paternal involvement in their children’s education related significantly to student achievement beyond that accounted for concerning mother involvement (McBride et al., 2005). In other words, it is indicated that the positive impact of father involvement on the child’s academic success is independent of and additional to the impact of mother involvement (Kadar-Satat et al., 2017).

Another important finding is the fact that in Greece, parental involvement is a less researched area compared to other foreign countries. This observed research gap could be argued to stem from the slow corresponding developments in the educational sector (Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2007; Samourkasidou, 2020). The limited and unclear legal framework combined with the lack of relevant research are two key factors in shaping a more formal school-family relationship (Penteri, 2012; Penteri & Petrogiannis, 2013).

Generally, parental involvement depends highly on the existing educational framework and laws that formally express each country’s educational policy. One of the ways to involve parents in an early childhood educational setting is by encouraging them to participate in decision-making. In Greece, as in many other European countries, there is no obligation according to top-level regulations to have parental involvement within governing bodies of pre-school centers.¹ Thus, in Greece, there is no any formal regulation in place that directly encourages parental involvement in the life of their child’s kindergarten. On the contrary, in some education systems (France, Slovenia), the top-level authority provides the actual frame of parents’ roles as representatives in the school board listing the areas of their obligations (EACEA, 2019).

In Greece, parental involvement in the educational process was introduced relatively late (Law 1566/85), making mandatory the establishment and operation of associations of parents and guardians. However, parental involvement in Greek schools, is still limited and rather focused on its “official” form (Gogola & Katsis, 2017; Zachos & Papapostolou, 2016). According to prior research, school

1. See the 2019 edition of the “Eurydice Report” published by the European Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

teachers seem to resist parents' and guardians' involvement in school management, restricting their contribution to seasonal school events such as bazaars, parties etc. (Riga & Souliara, 2016).

Moreover, the most recent early childhood framework, developed in 2014, lacks in providing specific guidelines for the promotion of school and family cooperation through school-based activities. Even though school-family collaboration is highly appreciated, the existing early childhood framework focuses strictly on the educator's role to guide parents in performing home-based learning practices. The early childhood educator is obliged to: (a) examine and utilise pedagogically the pre-existing knowledge and socio-cultural background that children carry from their families; (b) guide parents in order to find certain circumstances that could affect their children's home learning; and (c) provide parents with specific ideas for activities or strategies in supporting their children's home learning (Οδηγός Εκπαιδευτικού 2014, p. 89).

An initiative which applies the *Syneducational* model as the methodological context of a school-based project, drawing on school and father collaboration, seems quite promising and innovative not only for Greek early childhood education, but also for European early childhood research. This study is the first and as yet the only one carried out in Greece with a specific focus on paternal involvement in an early childhood setting by means of *syneducational* practices.

Research design

Based on the aforementioned findings, the present research investigated the acquisition of common educational experiences of fathers and children in a kindergarten class. The *syneducational* model was applied as a theoretical and conceptual framework and was implemented in collaborative action research (Kekes, 2000). Collaborative action research was chosen as the project's method due to the active nature of the initiative, and the multiple ways that this method can contribute to the development of the teacher's own profession and students' learning (Atweh et al., 1998; Sagor, 1992).

Specifically, this methodology of qualitative research was implemented in the *syneducational* programmes that have been conducted in Greece (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007; Mylonakou-Keke, 2009, 2012, 2019). Collaborative action research "*is a systematic learning process which takes place among groups of participants, who, through their collaboration, utilise the study of their own behaviours and practices and subsequently cultivate their critical thinking on the results of those behaviours and practices*" (Mylonakou-Keke, 2012, p. 171; emphasis added). Its basic aim is the improvement or change of a practice, a procedure, a situation and the development of knowledge related to the practices of the participants (Kekes, 2000). During the research process, it was aimed to cultivate the development of group experiential activities, which favoured collaborative learning environments. The experiential activities were based on the formation of an environmental project in which the adult participants (fathers) contributed with their knowledge, experiences, and interests.

Participants

The study was conducted in a public kindergarten in Thessaloniki

that functions under the scientific supervision of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Convenience sampling was used in this study. This type of sampling does not allow for generalisations, but ensures efficiency of data collection and is suitable for projects with no funding (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 105). An early childhood class with 19 children participated in this programme (15 boys and 4 girls) and their mean age was 5.2 years ($SD = 0.78$). Out of these 19 families, 10 fathers (mean age 41 years and $SD = 0.70$) volunteered to actively participate in the project. None of them had a prior experience of involvement in the kindergarten routine and they all had sufficient digital competence.

Methods and analysis

This study describes a four-months pilot intervention which lasted from January 2019 till May 2019, consisting 10 father's sessions in the form of visits. The research follows the adopted theoretical model that was utilised in the project and presents its procedure in order to show the engagement and understanding of the proposed pilot implementation.

The *syneducational* model was the research method of this intervention and simultaneously operated as the learning framework for all the participants, children and adults (fathers). The research methods included teachers' documentation of the project's implementation such as photos, videos, and children's creations that provided an assessment of their learning outcomes. These data acted as the digital diary of the implementation that was shared with the families. Every session was organised following the *syneducational* practice and the steps were explained to the fathers during the preparations of each session.

One teacher acted as a moderator during the implementation of the project and the second teacher acted as a researcher who observed and conducted the post-implementation evaluation. The 10 fathers were interviewed by the same teacher, in order to examine their experience of involvement in the class and the project. Their emotional reactions and newly gained knowledge about their children's learning needs and school behaviour were assessed by the end of each implementation, aiming to reveal their vivid personal reflection.

Specifically, based on the *syneducational* model (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007), the semi-structured questionnaire which was used during the interviews examined three parameters: (a) information about "inner" satisfaction which served as an interpersonal evaluation; (b) information about the change of attitude towards the programme, the pedagogical procedures and their children's learning; and (c) information about the creation of new ideas either during the planning of the current *syneducational* action or for a future programme (see Appendix).

Content analysis was implemented on the participants' responses. The responses were carefully read and coded twice by two analysts to ensure validity and consistency (Roberts, 1997; Weber, 1990). In order to ensure intercoder reliability, Krippendorff's *alpha* (α) was performed. The measure address chance correction and systematic coding error problem (Hughes & Garrett, 1990). The Krippendorff's (α) for the present study was .78.

The analysts identified the coding units of the responses for each question and, finally, the data was deductively analysed by applying the coding units. Tallies were made for the number of times (frequencies) every coding unit appeared in each question. Through the process of coding, the categories derived and then related and interconnected to their subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The results are presented in percentages interpreting the participants' responses followed with a few examples of quotes.

In the discussion section, the findings are explained gradually in line with the results of the semi-structured questionnaire. This presentation aims to show the deep engagement and understanding of the theory. Thus, the findings are entangled with the theory and the planning of the project with a reflective tone together with an evaluation of the adopted theory and recommendations for future studies.

This paper will address the following research questions:

1. In what ways can the *syneeducational* programme enhance fathers' involvement in early childhood education setting?
2. Does the *syneeducational* programme promote fathers' understanding of their children's learning needs and school behaviour?

Procedure

According to prior research, *syneeducational* actions seem to be appropriate in the creative development of new ideas and the creative exploitation of technology (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007). The holistic approach of learning in early childhood education in addition to the intellectual potential of the fathers, resulted in the idea of a *syneeducational* programme with the title "Daddies in Action". This involved an organised project with topics surrounding natural sciences and environmental education. The opportunity to utilise the fathers' intellectual backgrounds in a *syneeducational* thematic unit as well as their chance to get involved in the school's routine, were the main reasons for this research methodology. Digital tools were used as communication means during the planning of the project and the design of the actions, as cognitive and educational means, and finally, for the distribution of the programme to the other parents.

The starting point was the construction of a science and environmental project focusing on planet earth. The topics that were discussed over email communication were: Planet earth and the solar system; natural laws; climate; basic human needs (food, shelter, transportation); human activities and planet problems (earth pollution, volunteer activity); and human laws. These topics were to be presented interactively during specific sessions at the kindergarten.

Each father had to prepare a power point presentation with videos, photos and digital games along with an activity focused on arts and creativity. The criteria for the selection of these materials were based on the fathers' skills and interests, and aimed to reveal the consequences of human behaviours to the person itself and his environment. The materials were utilised creatively and throughout the project. Every session started with the study of previous knowledge, concepts, experiences, and emotions concerning the depicted topic.

During the project's implementation it was highlighted the uniqueness of every person, the differentiation of approaches,

knowledge and skills, as well as, the coherence of every different aspect in forming the present environmental situation for all humans. Children traveled inside the project's scenario, not as ordinary 'pupils' or audience, but as 'actively interactive' participants. The nature and organisation of the project, the intensely experiential nature of the activities as well as their fathers' presence in the class helped preserve the interest and enabled the active participation of children in the process.

The teachers supported the activities, prepared the necessary electronic equipment (computer, interactive board, and projector), encouraged the fathers, and also observed photographed and video-recorded parts of the *syneducational* activities. A Google folder was created for sharing photos and videos from the project, and a Padlet page² that was used as the programme's diary and communication platform with the families. All the educational materials that the fathers used (photos, power point presentations, and videos) were shared on Padlet after their visits, and the teachers shared the photos and videos of the sessions. These data (photos, videos, children's artworks that supported their brief interviews by the fathers) were educational materials; thus, they were not analysed.

All the fathers who participated in the development of the *syneducational* actions were not only visitors but also "educators". Children showed and explained the school's routine to the visiting fathers who took vividly part in the class activities before their presentation. Fathers observed and helped the teachers during the preparations for the *syneducational* action.

The teachers explained the teaching method used for the introduction of a new topic, which involved firstly detecting children's prior knowledge and false ideas about the topic. According to the *syneducational* practice it was very important to review children's prior knowledge and experience about the topic in order to facilitate the materials in the most meaningful way. Children were asked to draw everything they knew about the subject and then they were asked to explain their drawings to the father who was in charge of the activity. The fathers participated energetically in the completion of the first phase. They took brief interviews from the children and noted their answers, asking them to describe their ideas, experiences and emotions about the topic based on their drawings (see Figure 2).

After this the fathers had an idea of what the children already knew and believed about the topic which they were about to introduce and engaged themselves with the learning procedure. Moreover, they had attended the teachers discussing with the children during the morning routine and they had understood the school's teaching framework. Thus, they were able during their presentation to address children's questions and to focus on their basic cognitive needs or misunderstandings following school's teaching routine and rules. The *syneducational* activities usually ended with an arts activity (motor, crafts, and game playing) (see Figures 3-9) and the evaluation of the programme by the father.

2. See <https://padlet.com/sisichatzi/ldchejjw7uqv>

Figure 2
Participating in the school routine.



Figure 3
Taking interviews.



Figure 4
The presentation of the solar system.



Figure 5
Playing with magnets.



Figure 6
How to make a waterspout.



Figure 7
The game of happy and sad Earth.



Figure 8
Making our own cement Easter figures.



Figure 9
Playing with tools and tubes.



Ethics

The research was approved by the scientific committee of Early Childhood Education of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which supervises the kindergarten. The early childhood coordinator was also informed about the purpose and the methodology of the study. Details on ethics are provided in the text and abide by the Aristotle University Ethical Guidelines. A scheduled school – family meeting was organised before the implementation of the programme during which the parents were informed about the aim, rationale and content of the research. During that meeting all relevant consent forms were completed. The parents gave permission for photographic and video observation during the *syneeducational* activities accompanied by their children.

Results

Ten fathers contributed in the development of the programme's thematic unit. They decided on the theme "Nature and Human Activity" according to their interests and their academic backgrounds. It should be mentioned that most of them (80%) held a university degree.

According to their answers, all the participants' first impressions were mainly positive. As Example 1 demonstrates, some of them were excited (40%), but others were at the same time scared (30%) or stressed (20%).

Example 1:

"I never thought that presenting a topic and discussing with young children would make me feel stressed. They are young children, but I wanted them to participate and to understand what I was talking about. It was a great experience." (D.)

"Being in front of an audience is not the easiest challenge for me, it is frightening. But I wanted to participate for the sake of K because she was anticipating my visit. Everything went fine." (A.)

All of them enjoyed the activity and the interaction with the children, and a few participants (30%) pointed out the joy they experienced during their activity preparations. All of them evaluated their child's participation as quite energetic and they were satisfied to see the happiness which their participation brought to themselves and their children.

The majority of the participants (80%) stressed that the most important thing during their session was the knowledge they gained of their child's behaviour towards classmates, and a few (30%) were surprised positively (see Example 2).

Example 2:

"N. is behaving particularly good to his friends here compared to their behaviour at home with his little brother. I couldn't imagine that." (S.)

"I knew that I. is having a great time at school, she says so all the time. Now I saw it with my own eyes, and I understand why she feels so comfortable here." (G.)

Most of them (80%) were very pleased to see that their children enjoyed the experience and only two realised jealousy that their children showed towards their classmates. No father expected that their children would have trouble with them interacting with their classmates.

All the fathers were impressed by the way that the children collaborated vividly. A few of them (40%) realised that the children knew more things about the natural environment and the environmental effect of human activity than they expected (see Example 3). They also mentioned that children could understand and discuss the proposed new topic without any difficulty (30%).

Example 3:

"I never thought that children can discuss so many topics, and they know many things. K. never says what you talk about at home. I did not know what to expect but she answered to my question. That pleased me very much." (A.)

A great proportion (80%) stressed the great responsibility and

difficulty of the early childhood educators' job (see Example 4), pointing out the following issues: (a) taking care of many children at the same time; (b) giving time to them to respond; and (c) having patience and keeping an organised class schedule despite the differences in every child's individual needs.

Example 4:

"Children are a very demanding and cruel audience, if they are not interested, they turn their back on you. I wonder how the teachers manage to remember what everybody wants and keep all of them satisfied." (K.)

"Now I see that your job is exceedingly difficult, you act calmly even though you are responsible for them every minute of the day, and they outnumber you." (A.)

All of them characterised the structure of the *syneeducational* programme and the cooperation with the teachers as excellent. Finally, all of them evaluated the programme very highly and most of them proposed its continuation for the next year (80%). As Example 5 shows, one third of them (30%) even proposed that "Daddies in action" should be presented to the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and should be implemented in every early childhood centre in Greece.

Example 5:

"You should write a paper describing the procedure and you should send it to the Pedagogical Institute or directly to the Ministry of Education. It is a programme that should not be forgotten or kept a secret." (T.)

Discussion

The vivid interaction of fathers and children was pointed out during the evaluation of the programme. All the participants expressed their anticipation to take part in the daily routine of the school due to their limited experience. They also expressed their satisfaction and enthusiasm after their participation along with their very positive impressions.

According to our results a vast majority of the fathers were highly educated. This supports prior research that reveals the tendency of highly educated families, especially mothers, to participate energetically in school issues (Kim, 2004; Mousourou, 2012; Phtiaka, 1996; Styla & Michalopoulou, 2016; Vassi et al., 2016). However, based on our findings highly educated fathers may also be interested in contributing in their children's learning activities.

According to the participants' responses they experienced great "inner" satisfaction even though some of them had negative feelings, such as stress or fear before their session. They overcame all the negative thoughts and feelings and adapted to their role among the children very quickly. Most of them showed interest in focusing not only on the feelings they were experiencing and the topics they were introducing, but also in the feelings of all the children during their visit. They observed their behaviours during the sessions and they empathised with the young participants. After their presentations, they reported that they were satisfied in terms of the children's interactions, participation and emotional expressions during their sessions. The aforementioned results are in line with previous re-

search generally on the parents' satisfaction after the interaction with their children mediated by the teachers' guidance (Mas et al., 2020; Rentzou & Ekine, 2017); and specifically, the implementation of *syneducational* programmes describe the positive effects on the development of the emotional and social skills of the adult participants (Mylonakou-Keke, 2009, 2012, 2019).

The fathers' responses showed a clear change of attitude towards the school, the educational procedure and their children's learning. In line to previous research, all the participants reported only positive elements from their collaboration with the kindergarten teachers, thus highlighting the social skills that should primarily distinguish the teacher who is interested in the socio-pedagogical orientation of the school (Rentzou & Ekine, 2017; Samourkasidou, 2020). The unexpected positive comments about the difficulty of the early childhood educator's occupation were clearly stressed at two different critical points.

Firstly, the fathers noted the difficulty in the caretaking of a large number of children at the same time, based on the fact that the class had 19 young students. Caretaking of young children is a particularly important parental responsibility. As it was mentioned before, many of the fathers usually support indirectly the involvement of the mothers, taking care of their children at home during the school collaboration hours (Samurkasidou, 2020).

Therefore, it was particularly important for the success of the programme to give them the opportunity to observe closely and participate in the school's routine, which combines physical and psychological assistance of the young children during the school schedule. The fathers' *syneducational* experience began by letting the teachers train them in the pedagogical method which they applied to the introduction of a new topic, and secondly, by accepting their role in the class group and letting the children guide them through the school's routine. These two distinct situations gave them the chance to view and experience the communicative interactions between the teachers and the children, switching between the roles of "trainee" and "trainer- teacher". In line with prior research, the enhancement of parental knowledge about school's teaching methods seemed to encourage the parents' perception about their contribution in their child's education (Nitecki, 2015). It seems that their participation enhanced their understanding towards the needs of their children as well as the needs of all the children in the class (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007; Mylonakou-Keke, 2012).

Secondly, they pointed out the difficulty in keeping an organised class schedule despite the differences in every child's individual needs. The fathers focused on the differentiated instruction that is needed in order to keep the class organised. Even though they ignored the pedagogical terminology, their responses described the educator's teaching methods in few and simple words. They seemed to focus on the teachers' strategy for taking into account what standards of performance are required for each age group, by giving the children the time needed to express their knowledge and feelings. It is obvious that they observed and evaluated the teaching strategies that the educators applied during their visit, pointing out the main positive characteristics. They were able to identify and understand

the inclusive nature of the early childhood education system with the implementation of differentiated instruction during the school schedule. This finding was in line with previous finding concerning the teachers' guidance to parents especially during preschool (Mas et al., 2020; Nitecki, 2015; Rentzou & Elkin, 2017).

Furthermore, their positive comments on their children's behaviour, participation and knowledge revealed their active involvement in the group and also their energetic observation of their encounters with all the children. These remarks revealed the utilisation of socio-pedagogical practices in social and emotional education (Mylonakou-Keke, 2012). The majority of the fathers evaluated highly the picture they gained of their children's behaviour towards their classmates and the teachers. It was the first time for many of them to have had the chance to mix with their children in an educational situation as active participants of a group. Thus, it was no surprise that they evaluated the programme very highly and proposed its continuation for the next year.

The fathers also showed an increased interest in the needs of the kindergarten during a period after their visits. This result is in line with prior research (Samourkasidou, 2020). They gave assistance to the teachers for the resolution of practical issues, such as repairing electronic devices or furniture. They better realised the needs of the kindergarten after the *syneducational* activities and they helped not only when they were asked but they continued offering their help by volunteering. They seemed to feel more welcome in the school and more capable of understanding the early childhood educator's work with their children. As for the mothers, they were relaxed and quite curious about the results of their husbands' participation. Their involvement was mostly supportive; some of them gave ideas, while others helped during the preparation and in using Padlet. These remarks were not assessed systematically but they were based on the teachers' dairy with their observations and self-assessment on the nature of their relationships with the participants. Thus, they should be positively considered.

In line with previous pieces of research, the creative exploitation of technology led to the development of new ideas in an interactive learning environment for children and parents (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007). The use of the computer, the interactive board and Padlet as cognitive tools, helped facilitate the scaffolding between fathers and children during the activities.

The children experienced a unique learning process with their parents and the parents of their schoolmates, taking part in common "productive" activities (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005, 2007). They were filled with enthusiasm due to the shift of the traditional roles; teacher-parent-child. In agreement with prior studies, during and after the *syneducational* programme the children's participation in the classroom schedule as well as other school activities was significantly higher (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005). Each child eagerly anticipated his/her father's session, discussing the details of the activity preparations and revealing them to others.

The teachers showed more interest in the needs of their students due to the better understanding of each family dynamic (Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007; Mylonakou-Keke, 2012, 2019). They realised the way

that their work can be facilitated to organise the vivid participation of parents in the school and the impact that these activities have on their relationships with families. They overcame all the fears and second thoughts they had prior to the programme regarding the important issue of relationships with parents.

However, there were certain challenges that the teachers had to face during the implementation of the *syneducational* programme in everyday practice. The first one concerned the teaching interaction with the curriculum and the connection with its content to the interests and desires of the parents and the children. The second one focused on the early childhood schools' set of processes or tools and specifically on the interactions around learning as well as the shape of school's philosophy. These challenges were addressed at a team level, with the early childhood teachers and the parents driving the process. Discussions and communicative interactions between parents and children before every session played an important role in the success of the programme. The teachers became the moderators of the programme, and experienced a new challenging professional role enriched their educational strategies and practices (Mylonakou-Keke, 2012).

The aforementioned results support the findings of previous projects in which *syneducational* activities were fruitful for every stakeholder in school (Mylonakou-Keke, 2012, 2017, 2019; Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005). The study contributes to the field of school and family cooperation as interdependent systems. There is a necessity to shift towards a more cooperative action between them. The results of the programme's evaluation were very positive and encourage a new model of family and school collaboration. The current programme seems to be a great opportunity to facilitate a successful plan for paternal involvement in the early childhood setting. The most positive characteristic of the *Syneducational* model is that projects and actions are created by the participants depending on their interests and background. They have the opportunity to discuss and work together on a thematic unit that could be of interest to them and could become a prosperous learning experience for all of them (Mylonakou-Keke, 2012).

These findings are useful to teachers, school communities, and in educational policy planning, which aims to support the social pedagogical role of the school. A future aim would be to encourage all the fathers to participate, with cooperation from their families and the school. It would be interesting to explore and facilitate the collaboration of the two early childhood classes and the construction of a common *syneducational* programme. A more ambitious plan would involve the active collaboration on the programme with the municipality which financially supports the kindergarten. Digital tools would play an important role in the attempt, supporting communication between the participants and the *syneducational* activities.

Limitations

The present research was a pilot implementation of the *Syneducational* model in early childhood settings, thus every stage of research process and especially methods and the analysis of the collected data (videos, photos ect.) should be carefully reconsidered for future

study. As mentioned before, the small sample size and the convenience type of sampling limit the generalisability of this study's findings. However, this is a common limitation in small case studies with no funding. There is an important interest of research around parental involvement as well as *syneducational* programmes but there are limited data on very young children so exploratory studies could offer useful insights and recommendations in this field. Another limitation that should be mentioned is that the participating fathers had a better than average standard of academical knowledge and skills that surely contributed to completing this project successfully. Results might be different in more disadvantaged or deprived areas. Finally, another limitation of the study is the lack of evaluations from the children and the mothers regarding the project and its outcomes. These parameters should be taken into consideration during future implementation. This could offer a great opportunity to observe and evaluate the interactions between all the educators and the families as well as the shift in their cooperation.

Conclusion

Educational process primarily needs to set a target on new thinking and creativity to make education have the real effect on the society (Shaheen, 2010). Schools are places for the encouragement of creativity, collaboration, and empathy. All the participants (adults and children) exceeded their goals, they enriched their emotional and social skills, they learned how to manage knowledge collaboratively and how to co-create and generate new knowledge. In addition, they jointly realised the collective expectation, utilising the human and social capital that was created in each phase of the programme. Most of the parents together with their children are motivated and eager to find out anything new, to experiment and to play without worrying about definitions and theoretical models. Kindergartens can provide them the place and time to experiment and collaborate in a learning environment with teachers who are open-minded and not reluctant to change.

Author's note

Data from questionnaires and video recorded observations are available for review. The authors will retain data for five years as per University guidelines. Permission to access the data can be provided by emailing the corresponding author. Photos (figures) have been included with permission and participants' faces covered. No conflict of interest to disclose.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

- (a) What was your first impression of the *syneducational* programme; what did you feel about it?
- (b) What is your impression after the implementation of the *syneducational* action; what do you feel now?
- (c) How was your child's participation and behaviour during the *syneducational* action?
- (d) What did you learn during the implementation of the action in terms of:
 - Your child's behaviour
 - Your child's feelings
 - Your child's participation
 - The school's routine and procedures
 - The school's curriculum
- (e) What is your impression of the children's participation in the *syneducational* action you planned and implemented?
- (f) Any comments on the structure of the *syneducational* programme and the cooperation with the teacher?
- (g) Any future proposals?