

## **Social Policy in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers as to the Availability, Group Size, and Infant/Staff Ratio**

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### **Abstract**

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the availability, group size and infant/staff ratio of early childhood education and care centers for children under three of the age in Greece. According to the typology of Spring-Andersen, Greece belongs to the Mediterranean welfare model, where “familism” is the main component of social structure, which is based on strong family ties and an increased sense of intergenerational obligation. This model has family as the primary focus of social solidarity (provision of care and support) and productivity (economic activity within family businesses). Consequently, the involvement of the state in establishing and operating day care centers has been affected. The results of this study show that the existing structures could only cover a small amount of the actual population of this age group, assuming maximum demand. In addition, many of the existing centers had large group sizes and high infant/staff ratio.

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**Key Words:** Social policy, Social welfare models, “Familism”, Day care centers, Greece.

### **1. 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:

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.

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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 meager allowances. Both the split and the unitary model coexist (Thévenon, 2011). One of its basic components is the feministic 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 it 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).

## **Research Assumptions**

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) (Hypothesis 1). Large sizes are expected to exist large in the groups of infants and a high ratio of infants per adult (Ferrera, 2010. Esping-Andersen, 2002) (Hypothesis 2).

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. 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<sup>2</sup>. The total number of day care centers was 131. Of those, 98 were in Thessaloniki and 33 in the country. Of those, 46 were municipal day care centers, 12 were municipal day care centers for profit, and 73 were privately owned. 28 of the 46 municipal day care centers were in Thessaloniki and 18 in the country. From the 12 municipal day care centers for profit, 11 were located in Thessaloniki and one in the country. Finally, 59 of the private day care centers were in Thessaloniki and 14 in the country. In the total of 131 day care centers 2033 infants were accommodated. 563 of them were in municipal day care centers, 120 in municipal day care centers for profit and 107 were privately owned.

The total number of teachers participating was 252. Of those 96 worked in municipal day care centers, 21 in municipal day care centers for profit, and 135 in private centers.

### **2.2. 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.

After contacting each day care center by phone, we started visiting them in person. The visit to each day care center lasted from 8.30 a.m. till 13.00 pm in order to have a comprehensive picture of the range of activities taking place in the nursery.

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<sup>2</sup> In Greece, early childhood education and care services for children under 3 is represented only by "day care centers/nurseries or crèche" (The terms nursery, crèche and day care centre are used as synonymous). The day care centers are run by the private (for profit) and public (through municipalities for profit and nonprofit) sector.

### 3. Results

According to the first hypothesis, 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. Considering that the children who attended day care centers in this study were born in the year 2013, 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 2013 was 23,392. 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 2013, reaching a total number of 46,784 (ELSTAT, 2014).

Table 1 presents the number of births in 2013 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 2013	Estimated Number of Infants	Number of Daycare Centres	Number of Infants	Percentage %
	Drama	731	1462	0	0	0,00
	Kavala	1120	2240	9	133	5,94
	Evros	1276	2552	1	12	0,47
	Hanthi	1114	2228	3	36	1,62
	Rodopi	862	1724	2	28	1,62
Eastern Macedonia - Thrace		5103	10206	15	209	2,05
	Imathia	1206	2412	5	99	4,10
	Thessaloniki	10144	20288	98	1493	7,36
	Kilkis	566	1132	3	47	4,15
	Pella	1168	2336	0	0	0,00
	Pieria	1079	2158	4	64	2,97
	Serres	1111	2222	3	50	2,25
	Halkidiki	864	1728	0	0	0,00
Central Makedonia		16138	32276	113	1753	5,43
	Grevena	170	340	0	0	0,00
	Kastoria	387	774	0	0	0,00
	Kozani	1214	2428	3	71	2,92
	Florina	380	760	0	0	0,00
Western Macedonia		2151	4302	3	71	1,65
Total		23392	46784	131	2033	4,35

It can be seen from the table above those places in day care centers in Northern Greece cover about 4.5% 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 4.5% of the number of children would be covered by them. Apart from the small number of places in most prefectures, there are some that offer no day care centers. Of the 16 prefectures that were studied, 6 completely lacked day care centers. According to a study conducted by the EETAA in 2008, from the 78,272 children that were enrolled in municipal preschool education and care centers and municipal day care centers for profit, 71,631 were of ages 2.5 to 6.5 years old, quota 91.5%, and only 6,641 were of age 0 to 2.5 years old, quota 8.5% (EETAA, 2010). Since the early childhood covers a range of 4 years while infancy covers 2 years, the available places for children in early childhood should be twice as many as those for infants, but according to the data they were in fact about ten times as many, which reveals a lack of interest towards daycare for this age group.

The second hypothesis predicted large group sizes of infants and high infant/staff ratio. The group size was determined based on the number of enrolled children in each day care centre. According to the Greek law, the maximum permitted number of infants per day care classroom is 12, a number significantly larger than the ones defined in international literature. Table 2 shows the average group size per day care:

**Table 2: Average group size by day care centre category**

	N	Average	Minimum size	Maximum size
Municipal	46	16,83	7	28
Municipal centers for profit	12	13,67	10	18
Private	73	15,00	5	35
Total	131	15,52	5	35

As shown, the municipal day care centers for profit have a smaller group size compared to the other two types of day care centers, but on average still exceed the maximum permitted group size determined by the law. Also, municipal and especially private day care centers show large deviations in the group sizes in each centre. The reason some day care centers had an exceptionally small group size was due to their license that only allowed them to have such a small number of infants. From a total of 131 day care centers, 81 exceeded the maximum number infants per classroom, which translates to a percentage of 61.83%. Table 3 shows the number of day care centers exceeding the maximum allowed group size by each type.

**Table 3: Exceeded group size**

Type of nursery	Number nurseries with group size bigger than 12	Number of nurseries with group size less than or equal to 12
Municipal	35	11
Municipal centers for profit	7	5
Private	39	34
Total	81	50

In order to calculate the infant/staff ratio in each day care center, the number of enrolled infants and staff was used, regardless of their absence on the day of visit. According to the Greek law, the permitted ratio is 2 teachers and 1 assistant per 12 infants, namely 4 infants per adult. Table 4 shows the minimum, average and maximum infant/staff ratio for each type of day care center. All three types of nurseries greatly exceed the maximum permitted infant/staff ratio defined by legislation. Private day care centers show a greater a deviation of infant/staff ratio among day care centers.

**Table 4: The average ratio per category of nursery**

Type of nursery	Number of nurseries	Average infant/staff ratio	Minimum ratio	Maximum ratio
Municipal	46	8,02	3,5	11,5
Municipal centers for profit	12	7,67	5,0	10,0
Private	73	8,78	2,5	30,0
Total	131	8,41	2,5	30,0

#### 4. Discussion

According to Hypothesis 1, 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 4.5% 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 6 out of 16 prefectures studied.

For example, the prefecture of Kastoria 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. 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.

According to the second assumption, large infant group sizes and high infant/staff ratio were expected. According to the Greek law, the maximum number of infants in each nursery classroom should be 12 and the ratio of infants to staff 4:1. However, our findings confirm the assumption, as the average group size was found to be 16, while the average infant to staff ratio is 8.4:1, numbers far exceeding the group sizes as defined in the literature (the recommended infant/staff ratio is: 3:1 for infants up to 12 months old, 4:1 for infants 13-30 months old, 5:1 for infants 31 to 35 months old, 7:1 for children 3 years old and 8:1 for children 4 to 5 years old). Comparing the legislation in our country with that of other European countries on childcare regulations, we found great heterogeneity. For example, in Germany, the ratio is 5:1 and the group size is 10, in France the ratio is 8:1 with group size of 20 and England has a ratio of 3:1 and group size of 20. Regarding countries belonging to the Mediterranean model, Portugal has a ratio of 9:1 and average group size of 18, Spain has no well defined infant/staff ratio and the group size is fixed at 20 and Italy has no official regulations (Eurydice and Euro stat Report, 2014). However, the study of Deynoot-Schaub and Riksen-Walraven (2005), on nurseries in the Netherlands, found a ratio of 4:1 and a group size of 9, despite the lack of official regulations on those parameters, while in Baustad study (2012) on Norwegian childcare services the infant/staff ratio was found at 4:1. In the Nordic countries, despite the lack of formal state regulations, local communities have the ability to decide on the infant/staff ratio and group size, keeping them at low levels (Gormley, 2000). By contrast, in Portugal, according to the study of Aguilar and William (2013) and Pinto, Pessanha and Aguilar (2013), the ratio was 9:1 with an average group size of 16. These numbers coincide with the actual figures recorded in our country.

Focusing on the findings of our study, municipal nurseries were reported to have some of the highest ratios and group sizes, which may be due to the lack of sufficient places to meet the existing demand. This results in municipalities disregarding the law because they try to serve their citizens, perhaps giving rise to corruption. Private day care centers, also seem to exceed the numbers defined by regulations with group sizes that range from 5 to 35 infants. In the case of private centers, the group size laws are circumvented for profit reasons. Regarding the infant/staff ratio, our findings suggest a number twice the one specified by legislation, with privately owned centers showing the highest variation among centers. Private Day care centers usually accommodated the maximum number of infants allowed by their license, but only appointed one member of staff per nursery classroom in order to maximize profits. Using the data above, we can conclude that both municipal and private day care centers circumvent the laws regarding group size and infant/staff ratio. This is not only observed in our country, but also in other EU countries and especially those belonging to the Mediterranean model. Conversely, countries following the Nordic model presented small group sizes and low infant/staff ratio, despite not having state laws that define those parameters.

From all this we could conclude that the disregard for state regulations on nurseries in our country is either due to the lack of available services to cover the needs of the population or the perception that these are services that simply provide care and safety.

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