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Finnish and Greek early childhood teachers' perspectives and practices in supporting children's autonomy

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Kindergarten teachers from different cultural backgrounds attribute various meanings to children's autonomy. There seems to be cultural differences in early childhood education curricula with regards to how a child's autonomy is described and how it is supported. This qualitative study asks: How do teachers narrate their perspective and pedagogical support of children's autonomy, and what kinds of similarities and differences in the pedagogy and practices can be found in Finnish and Greek early childhood education (ECEC) contexts? The data of this qualitative study consist of a semi-structured questionnaire of 14 kindergarten teachers and observations of their pedagogical practices in the day care groups of 4- to 5-year-old children. The results suggest teachers' overall conception of autonomy was identical, but the different cultural contexts and curriculums affected the way the teachers emphasised and valued different dimensions of autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, autonomy support, early childhood education, teachers' pedagogical practices, cultural differences

Introduction

The main focus of this study is the way children's autonomy is perceived and supported by teachers in the context of Finnish and Greek early childhood education (ECEC). Our starting point is the admission that kindergarten teachers, in general, assign different meanings to

children's autonomy (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, there is limited knowledge about how autonomy is translated into pedagogical practices in ECE classrooms. The majority of the existing studies on autonomy, motivation, and autonomy-supportive behaviours (e.g. Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch, 2004; Reeve & Jang, 2006) focus on upper elementary and secondary education levels. In addition, there is a shortage of research examining the instructional style and the perspectives of early childhood teachers with regards to supporting children's autonomy.

From the perspective of child development, the significance of autonomy is emphasised. The existing literature suggests that opportunities to experience autonomy are crucial for a child's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser & Deci, 1996). However, one has to make the distinction between the "notions of autonomy and those of independence and individualism" (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001, p. 619). It is possible for children to feel autonomous when they follow a choice made by others, as long as they agree with this choice. Previous studies highlight that autonomy co-exists with control: Between autonomy and control there is a relation of dependence (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). This view of autonomy is shared by Dalhberg and Moss (2004), who describes the concept of autonomy as "Janus-faced", balancing between the axis of autonomy on one end and control on the other. Furthermore, as Dalhberg and Moss (2004) outline, autonomy can "mean the individual acting alone in a state of self-sufficiency. But it can also be used to mean the individual taking responsibility" (p. 21). Thus, autonomy is not a one-dimensional concept connected solely to an individual's freedom to choose. As Rose (1999, p. 84) describes, autonomy is the ability of an individual to fulfil one's desires and potential through one's efforts and "determine one's own existence through acts of choice".

In this study, our starting point was to conceptualise autonomy through the ways the teachers support the child in reaching his or her full potential and agency. We seek to deepen

the understanding of autonomy and shed light on how the previous illustrations of autonomy by Chirkov and Ryan (2001) and Dalhberg and Moss (2004) appear in ECEC practice. We emphasise the meaning of social relatedness to one's learning, well-being, and development. Thus, autonomy includes close attachment with educators and peers, and simultaneously, the connectedness of autonomy to dependency and control. To sum up, in order to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of autonomy in ECE, we need to further explore the meanings and manifestations of autonomy. In doing this, we need to identify different sociocontextual factors, such as (1) how teachers understand autonomy, (2) teachers' interactional style and practices in supporting autonomy, and (3) the cultural context.

Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) argue that a child's disposition to depend on significant others, such as parents or teachers, is usually accompanied by the perception that those others are usually autonomy-supportive. In other words, especially young children can feel autonomous or motivated when they follow directions or choices made by adults to whom they feel attached (Bao & Lam, 2008; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). As Reeve and Jang (2006, p. 210) state, "Autonomy support is the interpersonal behavior one person provides to involve and nurture another person's internally focused, volitional intentions to act, such as when a teacher supports a student's psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, relatedness), interests, preferences, and values". Reeve and Jang (2006) continue that teachers cannot directly give children the experience of autonomy. Their role is to encourage and support children's experience of autonomy e.g. by asking what children want, giving praise, and offering encouragement or hints. Furthermore, in ECE, the significance of a secure, sensitive, caring, low-conflict, interactional relationship between children and teachers, as well as the emotional availability of the teacher becomes highlighted (see Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Salminen, 2014).

Teachers' instructional style in supporting children's autonomy

A relative gap exists in the early childhood literature regarding the practices and behaviours of autonomy-supportive teachers. It can be argued that the teacher's instructional style plays a key role in defining the practices in supporting autonomy. A teacher's instructional style denotes the teacher's interpersonal style and interactions with the children as well as the teacher's methods of instruction and classroom management (Jang et al., 2010). According to the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), a teacher's instructional style can be viewed along a continuum that ranges from highly autonomy-supportive to highly controlling (Reeve et al., 2004). For example, Grolnick and Seal (2007) found out that autonomy-supportive early childhood teachers are more likely to have children who are more intrinsically motivated and engaged in classroom activities, than are children with suppressed autonomy.

In a series of studies, Johnmarshall Reeve and his colleagues (e.g. Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, Bolt & Cai 1999) categorised teachers similarly as high or low in autonomy support and also described the practices of autonomy-supportive or controlling teachers in the classroom (Reeve et al., 2004). For example, autonomy-supportive teachers listened to the students more often and were less likely to use directives and more likely to nurture students' needs and preferences. They also facilitated students' autonomy by presenting interesting and enriching activities (Reeve et al., 1999; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004). Conversely, teachers characterised as low-autonomy-supportive used more controlling language, relied on a teacher-constructed instructional agenda that defined what students should think and do, and more likely offered extrinsic incentives to mobilise students' engagement (Reeve et al. 2004). Although these studies were not conducted in ECE classrooms, we presume the results to be applicable to the ECEC contexts as well.

Existing literature (Jang et al., 2010; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve et al., 2004) has summarised autonomy-supportive teachers' behaviours and practices in three categories of instructional behaviour: (1) supporting inner motivational resources, (2) relying on non-controlling informational language, and (3) identifying the children's perspective (see also e.g. Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002; Stefanou et al., 2004). Each of these categories is important because research has shown that children with autonomy-supportive teachers achieve a wide range of positive educational outcomes compared to those with more controlling teachers (Jang, 2008). To sum up, as Reeve (2009) highlights in his literature review, "The findings from virtually every one of these empirical studies point to the same conclusion—namely, that students relatively benefit from autonomy support and relatively suffer from being controlled" (p. 62).

Autonomy as culturally constructed practice

In recent years, despite the increasing recognition of the importance of autonomy-supported learning environments, the cultural universality of autonomy has been challenged (Bao & Lam, 2008). To date, most studies regarding autonomy-supportive teaching and teachers' instructional style have explored the way multiple systems interact and influence children and what teachers do and say to promote children's autonomy or to control it. These studies have very often omitted consideration of the possible sociocultural influences in the expression and interpretation of autonomy. Recent international work suggests that many concepts like autonomy and teacher-child relationships may be viewed and function differently depending on the cultural context (e.g. Gregoriadis & Grammatikopoulos, 2014; Joshi, 2009). There are researchers that view autonomy as a culturally specific notion, relevant to Western cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), while others consider it as a basic and universal human need

(Ryan et al., 1996). However, there are only a few studies concerned with cultural differences around autonomy (e.g. Chirkov & Ryan, 2001).

An important part of the debate regarding the cultural context of autonomy has been discussed in terms of the contrasting continuum between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1990). This conceptualisation allows researchers to identify and investigate mediating factors in the links between culture and autonomy-support and expression (Tietjen, 2006). Deci and Ryan (2000) argued that there may be cultural differences in how autonomy is expressed. Under this cultural context scope of autonomy, the authors of this study decided to investigate teachers' autonomy-related behaviours and practices in the ECEC systems of two different cultural backgrounds: the Finnish, which is a more individualistic cultural background and the Greek, which is a more semi-collectivistic one.

Finnish and Greek ECEC systems

Finnish day care centres provide services for children from 1 to 6 years of age. The teacher-child ratio in 4- to 5-year-old children is one teacher per eight children. Typically, in Finnish child groups there are two kindergarten teachers and one nursery nurse working in a child group of approximately 21 to 24 children. However, in recent years, other ways of organising the group structure, such as working in small group activities (e.g. two teachers per 15 children) have also become more common. The children start obligatory and free-of-charge pre-primary school at age 6 and primary school at age 7.

Finnish teachers work closely as teams or working pairs of educators, and they negotiate joint pedagogical principles and practices. In Finland, the revised Early Childhood Education Act (580/2015) states that each child has a right to have early childhood education in either a day care centre or a family day care centre. ECEC is viewed as an entity of care,

education, and teaching, in which emphasis is put on pedagogy. National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care (2016, p. 15) state that the goal of early childhood education is to promote children's development, growth, health, and well-being. In doing this, it is essential that the teachers establish a mutual relationship with children, based on trust. Furthermore, the teacher must have knowledge about child development, growth, and learning, which forms the basis of pedagogy. Equally important according to the above-mentioned curriculum (2016, p. 18) is to get to know each child and his or her developmental stage. In doing this, the significance of producing individual learning plans for each child together with parents is highly emphasised.

With regards to autonomy, the Finnish curriculum (2016, p. 23) emphasises that children's gradual advancing in autonomy must be supported by teachers. The responsibility of teachers is both to help the children when needed, and at the same time to encourage them to ask for help. Being able to perform independently of daily practices (e.g. eating, dressing, and taking care of one's own things) is practiced with children. Furthermore, children are supported with their self-regulation and emotion skills. The curriculum places special emphasis on children's participation, learning, play, and social interaction.

The ECE system in Greece has similarities to the one in Finland. ECE in Greece comprises two parallel but distinct sections. The first section is childcare centres that provide services for children 2½ to 5 years of age, and the second is kindergarten sections that provide services for 4- to 6-years-olds (Gregoriadis, Tsigilis, Grammatikopoulos & Kouli, 2015). The teacher-child ratio in Greek kindergarten classrooms is one kindergarten teacher to 25 children (maximum), without the presence of any assistants. Kindergarten attendance is obligatory by law for at least one year prior to entering primary school. Kindertgartens, private or public, are under the administration of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs and provide services based on a national curriculum.

The National Early Childhood Curriculum in Greece (MoE/PI, 2002) was introduced in 2003. The general purpose of this national curriculum is to facilitate and support children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (MoE/PI, 2002). One of the basic principles of the Greek ECE national curriculum is "to promote children's autonomy and self-esteem" (MoE/PI, 2002, p. 587). The Greek ECE national curriculum is also accompanied by an extensive Preschool Teacher Guide (Dafermou, Koulouri & Basagianni, 2006), which aspires to support in-service practitioners to implement effectively the curriculum and enhance their teaching practices. The main purpose of the Preschool Teacher Guide is "to support early childhood teachers to create an open and flexible learning environment that will facilitate learning and promote the development of children's autonomy (Dafermou et al., 2006, p. ii). So it can be argued that both countries' ECEC systems and their curricula or curricular guidelines similarly aim at promoting young children's autonomy and encourage autonomy-supportive teaching practices. However, there is always the question regarding what is described in a curriculum and what is actually implemented in the classroom life.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to examine Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers' perspectives and practices in the early childhood classroom of children aged 4 to 5 regarding the support and promotion of children's autonomy. More specifically, this study explores whether there are differences between Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers' conceptualisations and practices regarding supporting autonomy in the classroom. In doing this the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do teachers narrate their perspective on children's autonomy?
2. What kind of practices do the teachers exploit in supporting children's autonomy?

3. What kind of similarities and differences in the pedagogy and practices can be found in teachers' views of autonomy and practices in supporting child's autonomy in Finnish and Greek ECEC contexts?

Method

Participants

Fourteen kindergarten teachers (N=14) participated in this study (13 female and one male). Six of the kindergarten teachers were from Finland and eight were from Greece. In the Finnish context, teachers worked together in pairs in one child group. Thus, three groups of 4- to 5-year-old children participated in this present study. In Greece, the eight teachers were working alone in their classrooms. Thus, eight classrooms with 4- to 6-year-olds participated in the study.

Two Finnish teachers had a three-year bachelor's degree in ECE (early childhood education), two had continued to master's degree in early childhood education, and two teachers had kindergarten teacher training of three years. The mean working experience of teachers was 14.3 years (SD=8.98). All Greek kindergarten teachers had a four-year bachelor's degree in ECE and a mean working experience of 13.77 years (SD=7.81).

Measures

Two measures were used in the current study: (a) a teacher-reported semi-structured questionnaire and (b) a semi-structured observation checklist. (a) *Teacher-reported questionnaire*: The semi-structured questionnaire that examined the teachers' perceptions and interpretations of the concept of autonomy included three open-ended items. These items explored how teachers defined the notion of autonomy, how they interpret it when it relates to kindergarten students, and how they describe an autonomy-related child activity. (b) *Semi-*

structured observation checklist: The semi-structured observation checklist that examined kindergarten teachers' practices regarding supporting children's autonomy included observations about five open-ended items. These items focused on teachers' organising the classroom environment to promote autonomy, teachers' verbal or nonverbal communication (e.g. listening to what each child says, supportive interactions), teachers' instructions to individual children (e.g. encouraging activity, helping a child), teachers' instructions to the whole group (e.g. giving instructions and guidance), teachers' reactions and feedback to a child's initiative (e.g. praises a child displaying autonomy).

Procedure

Data from 14 kindergarten classrooms in Finland and Greece were collected during 2016. First, all the participating kindergarten teachers from both countries were administered the semi-structured questionnaire about their perceptions regarding autonomy. Second, observations of the six Finnish and eight Greek kindergarten classrooms took place. The observations were carried out by two Finnish and three Greek post-graduate students who received similar instructions and training from the authors.

The six Finnish kindergarten teachers and their child groups were observed for six days, a total of 48 hours. Each Finnish kindergarten group was observed for approximately 16 hours. The eight Greek kindergarten teachers and their classrooms were observed for 16 days, four hours per day, for a total of 64 hours of observation. The participating teachers were informed about the study's aim and the confidentiality and anonymity of the responses, and were asked to sign informed consent forms. Throughout the whole research process the ethical standards and principles of research integrity were followed.

Data analysis

Each questionnaire and observation checklist was first fully transcribed and checked for accuracy. The two datasets, questionnaires, and observation checklists were analysed separately. The first dataset (teacher questionnaires) focused on teachers' perceptions about the concept of autonomy, and the second dataset (observation checklists) related to teachers' practices in supporting autonomy. The authors coded the both datasets in order to develop interpretative themes. After coding, thematic content analysis, which involves classifying data, was used to identify recurring regularities in the data and to identify meaningful categories (Silverman, 2011).

In the analysis regarding teachers' perceptions about the concept of autonomy and the autonomous child, the coding process involved clustering similar items, which in the first-order analysis produced 17 categories for the Finnish data and 14 for the Greek data, and in the second-order analysis yielded a total of six categories for both countries. For the analysis of the second dataset regarding teachers' practices to support children's autonomy, the coding process involved clustering similar items, which in the first-order analysis produced 16 categories for the Finnish data and 15 for the Greek data, and in the second-order analysis yielded a total of six categories for both countries.

For both datasets, coding and re-coding (first- and second-order analysis) were conducted independently by two of the authors each time. The data were reviewed to ensure that the themes or categories identified were representative of the collected data. The Finnish and the Greek researchers reached for each dataset a range of agreement between 79% and 86% with regard to the analysed data. Any inter-coder disagreements were resolved by review by discussion.

Results

Teachers' perceptions about autonomy and autonomous child

In descriptions of the concept of autonomy, both Finnish and Greek teachers talked about autonomous execution daily of routines, but they also highlighted other issues, e.g. the child's social relations, communication, and learning. Table 1 summarises the overall categories of the teachers' perceptions about autonomy and autonomous child. The categories are displayed in a hierarchical order, and they illustrate the different emphasis placed on the hierarchical order of the categories by the teachers, which is by itself a first indicator of the differences among Finnish and Greek teachers' perceptions.

[Table 1. Here]

The category "increase of child's autonomy" refers to the way autonomy is interpreted by the teachers: Autonomy is considered as the child gradually increasing competence and independence in his or her lifeworld, and similarly, distancing from the need of adult support. An autonomous child is an active agent who faces different situations and resolves problems independently. The Finnish kindergarten teachers considered this supporting a child's reaching his or her full potential the most important aspect of autonomy and placed this category in the first place. The Greek kindergarten teachers, on the other hand, despite acknowledging that being autonomous involves preparing children to act on their own, considered it as a much less important characteristic. Thus, this category was placed in the sixth place in the Greek data. The next two examples illustrate perceptions of teachers regarding autonomy in Finland and in Greece.

With regards to autonomy, it is important to distinguish doing on behalf of the child and helping the child. The child must not feel that she is left alone to cope with a task, in which her skills do not yet yield. Our job is to take the child's age and individual competence into account... The teacher must be present for the child to guide, teach, praise, talk, or even sing with the child. (Finnish teacher.)

Most of the children in my class are not used to being fully autonomous. I am trying to encourage them to a more independent way of functioning but it is difficult. Being alone with 25 children also forces me to address the group as a whole most of the time. (Greek teacher.)

Although the teachers placed different emphasis on the importance of “increasing child’s autonomy”, the previous examples show that the teachers had a rather similar conception on their role in supporting a child’s autonomy. However, there was an evident, culturally grounded difference in teachers’ accounts relating autonomy: The Finnish teachers talked about supporting the autonomy of an individual child, but in Greece this support occurred on the whole group level instead.

In both countries, the teachers highlighted the importance of “social relations with peers and teacher(s)” as a central manifestation of a child’s autonomy. The kindergarten teachers from Finland placed it as the second and Greek teachers as the fourth most important category. An autonomous child is able to interact appropriately and have good relationships with his or her peers, but also with the teacher(s). This category includes, among other things, a child’s ability to initiate social interactions with other peers, to display elements of prosocial behaviour, and to resolve conflicts without the intervention of the teacher, as the next examples highlight.

We practice social skills and understanding one’s own possibility to influence on things a lot with children. We consider children’s possibilities for play together in many ways: Child is able to have an influence on his play. We practice how to solve conflicts without teacher as “controller”. These kinds of skills require a lot of practicing. It is not self-evident that the children would know always what can they do in the day care centre, how they can form play groups in the way that everyone has friends, and the play would come along well. (Finnish teacher.)

In relation to children’s behaviour, I expect that they will be able to initiate conversations and interactions between them both in the structured and unstructured phases of the program. And also that to be more autonomous the children will be able to discuss their differences and not resolve to me all the time. (Greek teacher.)

Quantitatively, the teachers emphasised most “autonomous execution of daily routines”. In practice, this dimension of autonomy manifests itself in performing the necessary daily routines in the classroom life, for example, eating, hand-washing, dress-up, putting toys and materials back in their place, etc. The autonomous child manages most of these daily routines without seeking the teacher’s assistance. The Finnish kindergarten teachers acknowledge this

trait as an important part of autonomous behaviour, and place it third in their answers. Greek kindergarten teachers, on the other hand, place children's ability to perform the necessary daily routines independently as the most important (first place) prerequisite for autonomy development. Presumably, this difference in emphasis has to do with the fact that on most occasions the Greek kindergarten teacher is alone in a classroom with 25 children. This magnifies the importance of children being capable of independently performing daily routines, as the next examples illustrate:

Child's autonomy in day care centre is manifested in how the child is able to perform independently in dressing up, eating, and toileting. The practicing of these skills begins already in nursery groups. The child is encouraged and supported in gradually learning these skills. These issues are also documented in individual early childhood education plans of the child, in collaboration with parents. (Finnish teacher.)

Autonomy for me is to have a group of children performing our daily chores like a well-tuned clock. I have 24 children in my class, and if we don't manage to develop our autonomy in practical issues, it is almost impossible to function academically. (Greek teacher.)

In addition to autonomous execution of daily routines, according to kindergarten teachers, communication is a central feature of autonomy. The category "balanced teacher-child communication" focuses on the content and the nature of verbal exchanges the teacher has with the children. The teacher's guidance in order to support children's autonomy development should include questions that expand children's thinking, that provide to children the feeling that they are not alone, but also that they have the necessary space to function based on their interests and needs. The Finnish kindergarten teachers consider this characteristic as important for supporting children's autonomy and place it in the fourth place of their answers. In the case of the Greek kindergarten teachers, the communication among children and teacher, even in the form of discrete supervision and encouragement, is considered rather important for developing children's autonomy and is placed higher (third place) in their answers:

We are there for children in the day care centre. My goal is to encounter each child in some manner every day. I'm available if the child needs assistance. These short moments between child and kindergarten teacher have, in my opinion, a big influence on what kind of relationship is constructed between the child and the teacher. The child feels safe. (Finnish teacher.)

To invest in autonomy requires that the teacher is able to discuss with the children in order to expand their thoughts, to encourage their creative initiatives, and to have the opportunity to communicate constantly with the children. I feel I can supervise them more securely and steer them towards independence if I talk with them more. (Greek teacher.)

Although the Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers highlight the importance of teacher-child communication rather similarly, again, a central difference is discovered. The Finnish kindergarten teachers stress the importance of dyadic moments together with a child. The Greek kindergarten teachers, however, emphasise communication between teacher and the whole child group. In both countries the kindergarten teachers outlined the significance of a well-functioning and balanced child group for a child's well-being. Belonging in the group necessitates skills of behaviour regulation from the child. This feature of autonomy is manifested in "high level of self-regulation". Behaviours that involve increased emotional regulation and independency and less seeking teachers' attention fall into this category. The Finnish kindergarten teachers and Greek kindergarten teachers put similar emphasis on the importance of this category (fifth place). The following examples illustrate the teachers' role as giving support and scaffolding to a child's efforts in increasing self-regulation:

Emotional support by the teacher, e.g. in a situation in which the child starts to miss her parents, is important. (...) We also try to think and verbalise emotional states together with the child: What is causing your anger? Can you tell? (...) It is also allowed to be angry, as long as you don't hurt others. (Finnish teacher.)

It is my intention and effort to promote children's autonomy and self-regulation, when a child is crying or is losing its temper. But, I let them alone up to a certain point and I try to discuss with them and guide them into self-control as discretely as I can. (Greek teacher.)

The final category, "independent learner," includes autonomy behaviours that relate to a child's learning profile. For example, it refers to increased discovery learning, resilience to complete tasks, ability to follow directions without asking constantly for the teacher's help, and the skill to endure a failure or a mistake. The Finnish kindergarten teachers stressed this

attribute least (sixth place), while the Greek kindergarten teachers considered it the second most important prerequisite of classroom-related autonomy.

As a teacher, I enable a child's learning. In supporting a child's learning, it is important to see the different needs and skills of the children. In supporting autonomy, it is important to hear what the child thinks and what are his interests. A sensitive teacher enables good development for children. (Finnish teacher.)

I follow our curriculum guidelines and invest in child-centred methods. By working on projects that are initiated from children's questions or proposals, I aim to train the children to become more autonomous learners. (Greek teacher.)

To summarise, the results suggest the kindergarten teachers in both countries have a rather clear view about the profile of an autonomous child and what autonomy-related child activities should be. The overall perceptions of the participating teachers can be grouped in three main pillars: (1) the child's individual agency (e.g. self-regulation, increase of autonomy), (2) the child's social relations (e.g. relatedness, social skills for communication and cooperation), and (3) the child's learning and practical competences (e.g. independent execution of daily routines, independent learning). The comparison of the Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers' perceptions revealed differences in the importance they attribute to different dimensions of autonomy-related behaviours and in the way they interpret these dimensions. For example, the Finnish educators seem to focus more on empowering the child's individual development of autonomy and improving their socio-emotional independence, while the Greek educators are more interested in the children's learning autonomy and their ability to execute autonomously their daily routines.

Teachers' practices in supporting children's autonomy

In the previous section, we described teachers' views about autonomy and, to some extent, also their own perceptions about how they support autonomy in practice. The second dataset focuses on observed teacher practices in supporting autonomy. In Table 2, the overall category coding of the second dataset is displayed in a hierarchical order. The different line

of presentation of the categories for the two countries is by itself a first indicator of the differences among Finnish and Greek teachers' perceptions.

[Table 2. here]

The category "provision of ample time for individual expression and listening to children's talk" refers to the teacher's readiness to listen to the child and to create opportunities for individual expression of opinions and thoughts. Observations revealed that this is the most frequent practice (first place) of the Finnish kindergarten teachers regarding the promotion of children's autonomy. However, observations showed that Greek kindergarten teachers include much fewer practices (fifth place) that allow for extended individual expression. In Greece, the large teacher-child ratio (1:25) without an assistant in the classroom could be one explanation for this result.

The category "provision of verbal praise and emotional support for children's efforts and initiatives" describes the systematic support and encouragement of children's initiatives and autonomy-related behaviours on behalf of the teachers. Observations showed that kindergarten teachers from Finland (second place) and Greece (third place) focus their attention rather similarly on rewarding children's attempts to develop their autonomy. Both Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers strive to praise children's efforts and to create a positive climate that will allow children to take initiatives and cope efficiently with potential failure.

The category "supporting children's autonomy in daily routines" involves teachers' practices to promote children's autonomous execution of various daily classroom routines. Observations revealed that the Finnish kindergarten teachers are rather supportive (third place) and encourage children to complete most daily routines on their own, help the child

only when needed, and give praise when the child performs autonomously. The observations showed that several of the Greek kindergarten teachers' practices (second place) aim at helping children to adequately perform various daily routines like tidying up and cleaning their classroom and washing their hands. Similar practices also include facilitating children's autonomous eating, dressing, and toileting. Thus, a difference can be found in these practices: The Finnish teachers offer children plenty of positive feedback and help the child when needed, but Greek teachers put more effort in helping children in practice in the execution of daily routines. A possible explanation for this difference between countries could be attributed to cultural context and the different levels of independence in execution of daily routines of Finnish and Greek children when entering kindergarten.

The category "preparing an autonomy-friendly classroom environment" involves the way the teacher sets up the classroom environment and whether it facilitates children's autonomy (e.g. allowing ample space for free movement play, provision of easy access of materials, blocks, toys, provision of a quiet area for reading). Observations showed that kindergarten teachers from both Finland and Greece focus several of their efforts on creating an autonomy-supportive environment (fourth place). However, their Greek colleagues' practices are relatively undermined by the lack of available space in most kindergarten centres.

The category "schedule activities for autonomy development" refers to practitioners' efforts to include children in several goal-setting decisions and to enhance the children's initiatives to express their interests and their questions. Observations showed that Finnish kindergarten teachers frequently (fifth place) attempt to have children participate in setting up goals for their behaviour and their development. They foster children's agency and encourage them to e.g. choose play activities independently and afford time for hearing children's perspectives and ideas. However, observations showed that similar practices are not that

frequent (sixth place) in the Greek kindergarten classrooms and that teachers' practices focus mainly on having children take initiative regarding classroom management rules.

The last category is "teacher modelling skills and practices", and it includes the teachers' displaying of various actions or skills or behaviours so that children can afterwards imitate them successfully. Observations showed that the Finnish kindergarten teachers engage less often (sixth place) in such practices in comparison to their Greek colleagues. Practitioners from Greece resort very often (first place) in modelling to their students a variety skills or practices. Perhaps the influence of the different philosophies of the curricula of the two countries could explain this finding.

To summarise these results, it can be argued that Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers' practices are placed within a relatively common context, but at the same time they reveal several differences in the way they actively support the development of children's autonomy. For example, teachers from both countries acknowledge the importance of praising children and rewarding initiative-taking, but differences also occur because of the differences in infrastructure, resources, and curricular guidelines.

The Finnish kindergarten teachers focus their efforts mostly on facilitating children's free expression and initiative-taking and creating an emotionally supportive climate that will allow children to experiment and explore. The Greek kindergarten teachers focus more on securing their students' basic skills and daily routines and guiding them gradually to a more "advanced" level of autonomy. There are various interpretations of these findings that will be presented in the discussion section.

Discussion

The kindergarten teachers in Finland and Greece had rather similar perceptions about children's autonomy. From their perspective, autonomy included gaining agency and

competence in skills needed in daily practices, social relations, and learning. At the same time, teachers highlighted autonomy having concrete manifestations in increasing independence and distancing from adult support in different areas of daily life. These conceptions are in line with those of Dalhberg and Moss (2004), Rose (1999), and Ryan and Deci (2000). Despite existing consensus regarding autonomy in practice, there were rather straightforward differences between Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers. The Finnish teachers emphasised the significance of a child increasing in autonomy, which was conceptualised as learning concrete skills, but even more as gaining control of one's life world, increasing well-being and personal growth. The Greek teachers, on the other hand, stressed autonomy relating to daily routines and independent learning. Thus, the Finnish teachers had more "value-based orientation", while their Greek colleagues referred to more "practical orientation".

As mentioned before, one explanation for these differences lies in the cultural context, specifically in adult-child ratios. But the differences stem from the curricula as well. The perspectives and practices of Finnish teachers presented here subsume the ethos of national curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care (2016), which suggests the support of autonomy as a "value" and a child's basic right and, to a lesser extent, as practical support in the daily life of ECEC. In Greece, however, the curriculum (MoE/PI, 2002) is more rigid and provides directions for goals and ways of working. It does not set as the highest goal the pursuit of autonomy. Also, it requires an extended part of the daily schedule to include structured-organised activities, which, in practice, can be seen e.g. in a high appreciation of teacher modelling. Although the teachers appreciate a child-centred approach, it is logical that the demands of the curriculum results in a certain degree of teacher-initiated activities and practices. Thus, in the Greek context of ECEC, the principles and practices of the kindergarten teachers reflect the conception of autonomy as "Janus-

faced” (see Dahlberg & Moss, 2004) and balancing between autonomy and control (see Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). In the Finnish context, on the other hand, the dimension of control was not so apparent in teachers’ accounts or observations.

In addition to curricula, we need to consider also the cultural explanations behind the differences in autonomy. The Finnish kindergarten teachers’ starting point in supporting autonomy was based on the knowledge of the individual child’s personality, development and competences, and observation. The teachers stressed listening to children’s perspectives and the significance of individual encounters with the child. Then, the Greek kindergarten teachers’ support of autonomy was grounded in gaining practical competence (e.g. performing daily routines, independent learning) needed in the ECEC. From our perspective, these differences represent differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (see Triandis, 1990). In practice, the Finnish teachers e.g. stressed the significance of individual support, taking the child’s current skills and competences into account, gave time for individual expression of thoughts and opinions, and offered plenty of verbal praise and emotional support, which clearly denotes an individualistic highlight that is also apparent in the curricula. The Greek teachers’ orientation was more on the group level: They appreciated skills of group work, used teacher modelling, and offered plenty of emotional support and support for the execution of daily routines. Instead of individuals, the Greek kindergarten teachers talked about supporting children as a group, which can be considered a characteristic of collectivistic culture. In Greece, autonomy is not one of the values that is in the top priorities of cultural values. Social relationships are based on interdependence; hence autonomy is not that systematically pursued or valued as it is in Finland. Furthermore, we need to, again, consider the effect of adult-child ratios. In Greece, the kindergarten teacher works alone with 25 children, which logically explains the emphasis put on operating at the group level. In Finland there are three teachers working with the same number of children,

and this creates more opportunities and time for dyadic interactions between an individual child and the teacher.

Pedagogically it is important to further analyse teachers' practical support of autonomy in the classroom. There were two major differences between Finnish and Greek kindergarten teachers' practices. First, Finnish teachers stressed the importance of allocating time and resources for a child's individual expression of thoughts and opinions (first place), whereas in Greece this was considered much less important (fifth place). The main reason for these differences lies again in cultural and contextual factors, as we previously described. The second major difference was that among the Greek teachers the main objective (first place) was modelling skills and practices, which, accordingly, was the least important (sixth place) feature among the Finnish teachers. In both countries, the teachers gave verbal praise and emotional support for children's developing autonomy and strived for the construction of an autonomy-supportive classroom environment. These results support the notion from previous research that there exist cultural differences in the way autonomy is considered and accentuated. However, from a pedagogical perspective the results confirm previous research indicating the importance of teachers' role in the classroom (Jang et al., 2010; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve et al., 2004).

A limitation of this study is that although the results illustrate the pedagogically high-class autonomy-supportive features regarding the teachers' instructional style, the results remain unclear with regards to the impact of teachers' controlling and non-controlling instructional style to autonomy. The Greek kindergarten teachers' high emphasis on teacher modelling skills and practices and the classroom composition indicates more controlling communication from the teacher, unlike in Finland, where the teachers exploited very little controlling language towards children (see e.g. Assor et al., 2002). In the future, this relationship between teachers' controlling/non-controlling instructional style and autonomy

needs to be explored further. Another limitation of this study is that due to a relatively small sample the findings can't be generalised. However, the study points to the direction that there exist cultural differences in the autonomy-supportive practices in different cultural contexts of ECEC, which need to be explored further.

This study seeks to add knowledge about autonomy-supportive teacher practices and teachers' perspectives regarding autonomy in the context of Finnish and Greek ECEC, and offers some comparative insights about the cultural differences regarding this phenomenon. Previously, empirical studies regarding autonomy of young children have been scarce. This study produces valuable empirical insights into autonomy-supportive behaviours in the classrooms. Furthermore, results illustrate the dichotomous and complex nature of the concept of autonomy. A child's autonomy is constructed in the context of three mutually constitutive and interconnected dimensions: (1) In the *social axis*, autonomy is situated in the context of social relatedness, (2) in the *behavioural axis*, autonomy is localised in relation to dependency and independency, which contribute to a child's agency through freedom to control, and (3) in the *pedagogical axis*, autonomy is outlined in relation to autonomy support, control, or neglect.

The present study offers an important contribution to exploring the pedagogical practices of kindergarten teachers and adds information about the good practices of supporting autonomy. In the Finnish data, kindergarten teachers emphasised the significance of child knowledge and sensitive encountering with each individual, whereas in Greece the emphasis was on supporting the child as a member in his or her community. These aspects are both important to take into consideration in autonomy-supporting pedagogical practices. There is a definite need for similar qualitative studies, which provide a rich description of classroom practices, increase teachers' knowledge about the importance of supporting

children's autonomy in early childhood classrooms, and make a practical contribution to enhancing autonomy-supportive practices for the well-being of our young children.

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Table 1. Categories of Finnish and Greek teachers’ perceptions about autonomy

Finnish kindergarten teachers’ categories	Greek kindergarten teachers’ categories
1) Increase of child’s autonomy	1) Autonomous execution of daily routines
2) Social relations with peers and teacher(s)	2) Independent learning
3) Autonomous execution of daily routines	3) Balanced teacher-child communication
4) Balanced teacher-child communication	4) Social relations with peers and teacher(s)
5) High level of self-regulation	5) High level of self-regulation
6) Independent learning	6) Increase of child’s autonomy

Table 2. Categories of Finnish and Greek teachers’ practices to promote children’s autonomy

Finnish kindergarten teachers’ practices	Greek kindergarten teachers’ practices
1) Provision of ample time for individual expression and listening to children’s talk	1) Teacher modelling skills and practices
2) Provision of verbal praise and emotional support for children’s efforts and initiatives	2) Supporting children’s autonomy in daily routines
3) Supporting children’s autonomy in daily routines	3) Provision of verbal praise and emotional support for children’s efforts and initiatives
4) Preparing an autonomy-friendly classroom environment	4) Preparing an autonomy-friendly classroom environment
5) Schedule activities for autonomy development	5) Provision of ample time for individual expression and listening to children’s talk
6) Teacher modelling skills and practices	6) Schedule activities for autonomy development

