ABSTRACT

Introduction. This paper attempts a critical analysis of literacy acquisition by preschool children through a balanced literacy approach, a mixed method which brings together elements from methods with an emphasis on code and from methods with an emphasis on meaning. In particular, visuals of a balanced literacy approach, as it takes place (or not) in Greek preschool education classes, are presented.

Goal. Individual issues, challenges and perspectives which are introduced by this method are explored in comparison and in correspondence with the traditional and outdated understanding of literacy, which links it to learning to read and write. Emphasis is made on the strengths and weaknesses of a balanced literacy approach in order to highlight the prospects for its application in early childhood education on a larger scale.

The Results. Questions and concerns are raised regarding the expansion and application of the method and its acceptance by Greek kindergarten teachers. However, the need for the application of a balanced literacy approach in early childhood education classes is reflected, as the only method that combines, adopts and utilizes elements of many methods, able to offer young students sufficient resources in the course
of mastering literacy. Summarizing and with clear reference to all of the above, literacy balancing as a mix of language teaching traditions for the enhancement of natural literacy and the teaching of school literacy must be understood in Greek early childhood classes and adopted by preschool teachers. We could state that teachers, by way of exception or deviation from what is indicated through the official texts, they carry out their own educational act in dialogue with their teaching identity but also with the identities of their students (Apostolou et al., 2020). In this context, the need for continuous, substantial, systematic and targeted training of kindergarten teachers in literacy issues arises (Apostolou, 2021). It also highlights the need to clarify and enrich the theoretical principles and methodological guidelines of the official texts with clear references to the balanced approach to literacy.

Conclusions. Based on the assumption that for the strengthening of literacy and the teaching of the language, a decisive role is played by the school environment, the teacher is recognized as the most important of all factors for language teaching. As school environment and teacher’s role is co-shaped by a series of socio-cultural factors of varying strength that influence and determine the type of literacy that is promoted in a school classroom (educational, student identity, family, locality, syllabus, school textbooks, etc.), during the last years an attempt was made to make visible the way in which they shape their teaching choices.

Key words: early childhood education, language, balanced literacy, reading, writing.

Introduction

Literacy as a Lifelong Process

Today, more than ever before, the concept of literacy is intertwined and identified with the participation of the individual in social processes, leaving behind, as a traditional and outdated concept, its connection with learning to read and write.

The term literacy is used to denote one’s effective participation in social processes and as a social practice constitutes one of the most important practices of ensuring personal and social integration. In this context, the path to literacy is not a matter of a few years of school attendance, but it is a lifelong process that begins in preschool (UNESCO, 2016; UNICEF, 2019). As the most important foundations are built and laid at early age in such a way that will help the child succeed in later school life and in other dimensions of his life (OECD, 2010; UNICEF, 2019), a child’s literacy experiences in preschool are crucial for all children. Early childhood education is the first direction of building strong academic and social foundations and plays a key
role as the foundational phase in the literacy pathway (UNESCO, 2016; ELINET, 2016). It has a multiplier effect as it “empowers people”, makes them “able to participate fully in society” and contributes to the improvement of life in an ever-increasing digital, text-mediated, information-rich, rapidly changing world (Eurydice, 2011).

In recent years the value of childhood literacy, linked to the subsequent school success or failure of the child and contributing in the long term to social well-being, social justice and the development of democracy, has been of increasing interest to the international community (UNESCO, 2017). Development is directly linked to high-quality experiences provided to the child at this age (Heath, 1983; European Commission, 2008; UNESCO, 2015; Djonov et al., 2018), which in some part mean the practices of strengthening natural literacy in the family and school context and/or teaching school literacy into a school context (Hanemann, 2015).

According to Hasans’ approach, natural literacy develops and evolves into school literacy, following two lines of development. Specifically, Hasan states that:

“Young children’s acquisition of emergent literacy follows a natural course of development, which is called the natural or everyday line of literacy development and develops in the context of everyday activities, in the unstructured context of primary socialization of the child” (Hasan, 1996: 143).

In parallel, of course, with this natural line of literacy development, and as the child enters compulsory kindergarten education, the child also enters in what Hasan (1996) defines as an exotic line. This line follows and builds on what has been mastered in the context of daily activities, thus in the context of the natural/daily line of literacy development. The exotic line concerns the development of literacy in a structured context (school environment), in the formal educational context. Its development, which works alongside physics, is largely determined by pre-existing knowledge acquired from the wider family environment (Hasan, 1996). These two lines coexist in order for literacy to emerge in the family environment, in the wider social context, and also in the formal school/educational context.

In this context, the pedagogy of multiliteracies was also developed, according to which literacy is a social practice, a way of developing
critical thinking. According to multiliteracies the function of reading and writing is not enough and the function of other modes of representation (written, visual, oral, etc.) should also be studied (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Within this context, there is a need to develop those abilities and skills that will make the person capable of understanding texts that combine different semiotic means for the production of meaning (linguistic, visual, audio) and discourses produced in polymorphic and multicultural social environments (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003; Hatzisavidis, 2005). According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007):

“We understand literacies from a socio-cultural perspective, which means that reading and writing can be understood in the context of social, cultural, political, historical and economic practices, of which they are an integral part” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007: 1).

For the theory of multiliteracies, we could say that there is no single phenomenon that constitutes literacy, but instead there are as many literacies as there are “social practices and conceptions about writing and reading” (Street, 1984: 1 in Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). According to Dinas and Goti (2016: 30) the pedagogy of multiliteracies as the most modern approach to literacy “does not negate any of the didactic practices of literacy, but complements them by trying to immerse students in everyday practices of meaningful production using various means and methods”.

**Literature Review**

**Balanced Literacy Approach**

Within this framework of viewing literacy, a new method has emerged and promoted as the most effective for enhancing literacy in preschool classrooms, Balanced Literacy Approach. Basic principles of earlier theoretical approaches are combined and expanded towards a broader conceptual framework.

Balanced literacy method brings together elements from *methods with an emphasis on code* and from *methods with an emphasis on meaning*. According to researchers (Hannon, 2000; Smith, 2006) the acquisition of literacy is not one or the other and full understanding of literacy in education requires an awareness of both. Reading and writing based on their socio-historical dimension and can be understood within
each social, political, economic and historical context (Baynham, 2002; Gee, 2002; Snyder, 2008). Referring to abilities without considering the social context in which they are cultivated would be out of place (Baynham, 2002), just as it would be out of place to emphasize the social context without considering abilities.

Furthermore, Xue and Meisels (2004) stated that:

“For a child to learn to read effectively, he needs a balanced teaching method which will include on the one hand learning to break the code (decoding-learning to break the code) and on the other hand his involvement in meaningful reading and writing activities (engaging in meaningful reading and writing activities) for the child himself” (Xue & Meisels, 2004: 222).

It is about the synthesis of a coherent, operational, scientific and well-structured theoretical body and not a random amalgam of methodological elements (Pearson et al., 2007). The balanced approach includes a variety of reading and writing experiences, from which teachers can choose depending on classroom conditions, needs, and children's developmental stages (Tracey & Morrow, 2007).

**Review: How Balanced Literacy Approach Came About**

The transition of the child from the use of the spoken word to the effective use of the written word was and is an issue of major importance for the educational process, with the conflict between the psychological/cognitive and the social dimensions of literacy beginning several years before it significantly subsided. It appeared, therefore, after the mid-1990s and was created outside of what the scientific community calls the Great Debate (Reading War) a tendency towards the adoption of a mixed method model or a balanced approach of literacy in preschool and first school age. The Great Debate refers to a “controversy” between supporters of the cognitive approach to language teaching (phonemic approach or direct teaching) and those who support the holistic approach (reading and writing are learned through actual reading and writing). Proponents of the holistic approach consider phonics teaching and direct instruction to be rigid, pointless, arbitrary and unnecessary procedures. Proponents of direct instruction characterize the holistic approach as unrealistic, unscientific, romantic, and anarchistic idealism (Chall, 1967; Smith, 2006).
Within this context of controversy and opposition, Bentolila and Germain (2005) were reported to the following categories:

1. **Code-focused methods (bottom-up model).**
2. **Meaning-focused methods (top-down model).**

The methods of teaching first reading and writing (**Code-focused methods**) which follow the **bottom-up teaching model** emphasize the learning of the code, the knowledge, that is the functioning of the alphabetic system, and are strictly structured from the previous steps. The methodology for teaching early reading and writing includes a variety of methods with different goals and different value for each alphabetic language. Code-focused methods that follow the bottom-up teaching model have been heavily criticized mainly for distancing themselves from the understanding and meaning of the text, since decoding the code does not automatically lead to understanding and critical reading of the text.

The methods that aim at reading comprehension and the way it will be taught (**Meaning-focused methods**) correspond to the **top-down teaching model**. These methods emphasize meaning and address the functions of reading and writing in the context of social practice. Literacy, that is understood in relation to the social, cultural, political and ideological contexts in which it is embedded (Baynham, 2002), take various forms and produce various forms of linguistic behaviour (Aidinis & Kostouli, 2001) that are shaped by the social environment. The teaching practice, with the application of the methods included in the top-down model, seems to shift from the traditional and systematized form it had in the past (methods with an emphasis on code) to a student-centred form of teaching (methods with an emphasis on meaning).

The above categorization was made based on the assumption that these are fundamental literacy skills that during primary school age are developed in an interactive way and must be taught in combination and not individually.

From this categorization, a third category emerged, which compares and combines elements of the two categories. It is a mixed method (balanced program), which is not described as equal teaching of phonics and texts, but the complex teaching of reading comprehension, development of decoding skills, whole word recognition, vocabulary
enrichment, specific comprehension skills and use of reading in a sociocultural context (Aidinis, introduction to Smith, 2006).

Although in the Greek reality, according to Aidinis (introduction to Smith, 2006), there has never been a strong controversy between the methods of teaching reading, as was cultivated in many English-speaking countries, nevertheless the application of a balanced approach to literacy in preschool and primary school age has emerged.

One finds, then, that the conflict between procedural traditional methods that focus on understanding the code and holistic approaches that centre and focus on meaning is receding and being replaced by the balanced method of teaching literacy. It is essentially a proposal that is not described as equal teaching of phonemes and texts, but according to which the teaching aimed at developing reading comprehension must be complex as it contains the development of decoding skills, whole word recognition, vocabulary enrichment, specific reading comprehension skills and use in a sociocultural context (Aidinis, introduction to Smith, 2006). The tendency to balance the basic principles of earlier theoretical approaches is not accidental today (Apostolou, 2022), as the content of the concept of literacy has expanded towards a broader conceptual framework, with reading and writing being studied based on their socio-historical dimension and being able to be understood within the respective social, political, economic and historical context (Baynham, 2002; Gee, 2002; Snyder, 2008).

Results

**Balanced Literacy Approach in Early Childhood Education**

Tracey and Morrow (2007) note that in order for teachers to choose a method of enhancing literacy, they must first of all take into account that:

(a) literacy includes reading and writing,
(b) reading is not only word recognition, but word recognition is part of reading,
(c) readers must be able to take different stances when reading,
(d) the purpose for which children write something must be clear, and
(e) writing is not just about grammar, letter recognition and pronunciation, but these are all parts of effective writing.
Reading is part of general language development and not a distinct skill isolated from listening, speaking and writing. It is, therefore, important in the context of language teaching that these abilities are developed simultaneously and in interaction and not serially one after the other. Specifically, reading practices include read-aloud, participatory reading, guided reading, independent reading, while for writing they include participatory writing, interactive writing, writing workshop, and independent writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, as ref. in Kennedy et al., 2012).

Based on the above conceptualizations, we could say that in the context of the balanced approach to literacy, preschool teachers combine a repertoire of strategies based on the cultivation of technical skills and a repertoire of strategies based on meaning-making strategies’ that most respond to the requirements of students and the educational framework (Apostolou, 2021). According to Cowen (Cowen, 2003, as cited in Eurydice, 2011: 34):

“Designing a balanced program for early reading instruction requires teachers to have a thorough knowledge of literacy research on emergent literacy, assessment-based pedagogy, phonological and phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics and word study, selecting readers at the appropriate level, reader response, the writing process, and constructivist learning” (ibid.).

In particular, with regard to reading, the literacy skills that are cultivated in the context of the balanced approach are those that fall under the learning of the writing and reading code (constrained skills), i.e., phonological awareness, phonology (for reading/syllabification), fluency, as well as those that are part of more emergent and communicative approaches (unconstrained skills), such as vocabulary, comprehension and syntax (Eurydice, 2011; Paris, 2005; Tracey & Morrow, 2007). Mastering the reading skill is the result of long-term practice and is based on two basic independent but interrelated processes, decoding and linguistic/listening comprehension (see ind. Eurydice, 2011; Porpodas, 2001; Paris, 2005, 2008; Torgerson et al., 2006; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Decoding is the first necessary cognitive function and includes the recognition of visual-written symbols and their translation into a phonological code. Necessary conditions for decoding are the
knowledge of phoneme-graph correspondence as well as the spelling system of a language (Porpodas, 2001). According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHHD, 2000: 189) decoding refers to the translation or decoding of written language into spoken language and in alphabetic systems it depends on:

- phonological awareness: the ability to perceive and receive the sounds/voices in words;
- the phonemes: the awareness of the sound/sound-letter correspondence;
- fluency: “the ability to read with speed, accuracy and the appropriate style”.

Linguistic/listening comprehension refers to the process of understanding and interpreting what is read and depends on:

- the vocabulary: which can be distinguished between the words one knows and understands (receptive vocabulary) and the words one uses to express oneself (expressive vocabulary);
- spoken language: understanding the grammatical function of the words of a sentence and their syntactic structure;
- the cognitive background for the natural and biological world, social relations, behaviours, social structures. This knowledge is important for translating and using the right words and provides a background for vocabulary building.

According to Porpodas (2001) “basic reading ability can be determined based on the level of decoding function and the ability to understand spoken language” (ibid.: 44). The decoding of the written word, according to this view, is a cognitive function that includes the recognition of the visual (written) symbols that make up the written code, as well as their translation into a phonological representation. It presupposes the correct functioning of the perception and memory of graphic and phonological information, in order to be able to recognize the letters and their phonemic determination, based on the knowledge of the correspondence between letters and phonemes, as well as the basic rules that govern it. Comprehension is the second and necessary cognitive function (after decoding) in order to complete the reading process.

**Reading Comprehension = Decoding x Language Comprehension**
Reading is the result of the successful operation of the above two processes, their product or sum. In alphabetic language systems, words can be recognized – read and understood both on the basis of their semantic and syntactic parts and through the mediation of phonological awareness, i.e., children’s ability to perceive the word as a unit of speech, to manipulate its phonological structural elements at will and to be able to analyse and synthesize these elements (Porpodas, 2001).

Phonological awareness has a major impact on reading development and includes: (a) the segmentation and composition of phonemes into syllables and words, (b) knowledge and recognition of the letters of the alphabet, and (c) visual memory.

Decoding is critical to reading comprehension. Without decoding, there can be no understanding, since only then is it possible to understand the meaning of a written word, but also without understanding, successful reading cannot be achieved (Porpodas, 2001). If a child cannot decode, then it may become impossible to make sense of the written word. However, once the words have been decoded, the child must rely on understanding spoken language to understand the writer’s message. The effective reader has good listening and comprehension skills. Some factors related to comprehension are vocabulary and syntax development, recognition of important ideas, sensitivity to the hierarchical structure of the text, understanding the logical structure of the text, making inferences, prior knowledge, guiding comprehension, the reading experience and the goal and motivation for reading (Aidinis, 2006).

The processes of decoding and comprehension interact in many ways in the two phases of reading development:

(a) learning to read, which mainly concerns decoding and
(b) reading to learn, which mainly concerns understanding (Chall, 1983).

In various alphabetic systems, as in Greek, the first phase of reading “learning to read” focuses on encoding and teaching reading is related to building phonemic awareness, phonemes and fluency, recognition of frequently used words. These practices, known as “de/encoding techniques” to be learned effectively require clear and systematic guidance (Adams, 1990, as cited in: Djonov et al., 2018). Teachers to support children involve them in processes of decoding texts with simple/familiar vocabulary, repeating words, grammar and
syntactic structures. These processes require low levels of understanding. A recent study (Suggate, 2016) revealed that these practices have high levels of success, but fail to target high-level reading skills such as comprehension.

The second phase of reading “reading to learn” (reading to learn) is related to the transition from encoding to understanding, which takes place in middle school age (“fourth-grade slump”). The child in this phase begins to acquire skills and knowledge without direct guidance and restriction that develop from birth throughout life. Unlike learning-to-read skills that are faster and more immediate, the development of comprehension is a slow and gradual process that requires extensive exposure to words and repeated immersion in rich verbal experiences in a variety of ways (Hirsch, 2003, as cited in: Djonov et al., 2018). Research has shown that children who come from environments with poor vocabulary, limited exposure to written language and few opportunities to develop oral language face problems both in preschool age and later, in the phase “reading to learn” (reading to learn) (9–10 years) with difficulties in vocabulary, language and reading comprehension (Hart & Risley, 1995, as cited in: Djonov et al., 2018). The language achievement gap is found at a very early age and reflects differences in learning opportunities. Training aimed at bridging this gap with compensatory reading comprehension interventions has not yet had the expected results, according to Konza et al. (2010). On the contrary, according to Suggate (2016), these interventions have very significant effects on skills such as phonemic awareness. Recent research has also shown that if the systematic teaching of reading begins later (at the age of 7 rather than 5) there is a greater chance that the child will understand better what he reads, since by the age of 11 he is now beginning to understand and not just names letters and words (skills that continue to be used exclusively by children exposed to systematic instruction at age 5) (Suggate, Schaughency, & Reese, 2013).

Morris (2015) refers specifically to writing, noting:

“A balanced literacy program for a school context, in addition to actively listening to challenging stories, must therefore also include writing, through which the child learns and reads... opportunities are given for the written word for play, for emergent writing, for participatory and interactive writing workshops. Early skills of children related to the written word, such as e.g., picture explanation,
single sentences, short notes, help them understand that sentences are made up of words and that words are made up of phonemes that correspond to letters” (Morris, 2015: 507‒509).

Additionally, and according to De Silva Joyce and Feez (2016) the written word allows children to tell a story or make an agreement, giving them opportunities to read and re-read texts written by themselves, individually or in groups. Through the approaches of Morris (2015) and De Silva Joyce and Feez (2016) the correlation between reading and writing is seen, which is strengthened and promoted significantly with the balanced teaching method.

This method is typically illustrated in Scarborough’s (2001) “Reading Rope” figure below (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
*Reading Rope, Scarborough’s, 2001*

There seem to be two “threads” that intertwine to create a skilled reader who can read fluently. The “thread” of word recognition that includes sight recognition of familiar words, decoding (alphabetic principles, spelling-sound correspondences) and phonological awareness (syllables, phonemes, etc.) and the “thread” of understanding (language comprehension) which includes the cognitive background (background knowledge: facts, concepts, etc.), the vocabulary (vocabulary: breadth, precision, links, etc.), the structure of the language (language structures: syntaxes, semantics, etc.), verbal reasoning (verbal reasoning: inference,
metaphor, etc.) and literacy knowledge (print concepts, genres, etc.) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**
*Simple View of Reading, Gough and Tunmer, 1986*

Simple View of Reading

![Simple View of Reading](image)

Within this context, early readers need to be exposed to more “challenging texts”, as Morris (2015: 509) typically states, “texts that they cannot read on their own. They also need time to actively listen to “challenging” stories through a program that also includes exposure to written language”.

All these promote the social dimension of literacy (Kennedy et al., 2012). The development of decoding and meaning-making strategies within a specific context should be encouraged simultaneously and in parallel for reading and writing (Tracey & Morrow, 2007). Students’ language acquisitions are clearly “better” when teachers use combined (simultaneous and balanced) elements and practices of the two strategies, decoding and comprehension.

Furthermore, according to Pearson et al. (2007), the basic elements on which a balanced approach to language teaching should focus are the following:

The authenticity that concerns what is taught in school. The reading and writing, oral and written activities in which the students participate should be authentic and have real goals;
The pedagogical discourse (classroom discourse) to which the students are exposed in the classroom. Depending on the type and goal of the literacy event, different patterns of school discourse are presented and underline the diversity of children’s out-of-school language experience in relation to the “official” pedagogical discourse of the classroom and school. Balancing must take into account not only how teachers control discussion, dialogue and interaction, but also which language(s) and discourses fit into the school context;

(b) Teachers’ roles within the class, as it is completely connected to the type of pedagogical speech of the class, and finally;

(c) The control exercised by the curriculum and which is exercised on teachers through the mandatory use and application of textbooks and is checked daily by the family through student performance.

Teachers must adhere to the principles of the curriculum and at the same time adapt the program to the specific needs of their students, so that they can successfully move between them. Teachers must be flexible, as there may be children in the class who are already fluent readers and need “higher” quality and more difficult texts. As the ability to read fluently requires the combination of various skills and abilities, such as phonemic awareness, alphabetic principles, rich vocabulary, knowledge of the world, knowledge of grammatical elements of different techniques, e.g., narration, explanation, narration, argumentation, etc. (Campbell et al., 2014; Tracey & Morrow, 2007), teachers’ concern cannot be to master these skills required for fluent reading, only through textbooks, but also mainly to offer a variety of authentic texts that cultivate on the one hand the love of reading and on the other they promote and strengthen reading ability (Heydon et al., 2004; Tracey & Morrow, 2007; Tracey, 2016).

Furthermore, creating a culture of reading and writing for pleasure and information is important for cultivating a positive attitude to literacy. This can be enhanced by making available a wide range of reading materials (print and digital) which children can take home to share with the family, offering opportunities for children to collaborate and engage in high-level discussions about books and the texts they create (Shaw & Hurst, 2012; Tracey, 2016; Tracey & Morrow, 2007).
A balanced literacy program should give equal weight to the different dimensions of literacy by building children's motivation, engagement (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Eurydice, 2011) and self-efficacy, with practices, as shown in the figure titled A Model for Literacy Development shown in Figure 3 (Credit from Leslee Allenm, 2018):

Figure 3
A Model for Literacy Development (Credit from Leslee Allenm, 2018)

Studying the characteristics of a balanced approach to literacy, as shown in the figure above, one could say that teaching aimed at developing reading comprehension must be complex and contain on the one hand the development of decoding skills, overall word recognition, the enrichment of the vocabulary, and on the other hand the cultivation of specific abilities to understand and use reading in a socio-cultural context. In this context, reading is associated with the cognitive function of decoding but also the complex-higher function of understanding and writing. Furthermore, reading is correspondingly associated with encoding and the production of written language. Reading and writing function as interrelated cognitive and social processes characteristics and
they develop in parallel and reinforce each other. Thus, the phonological skills that children acquire through writing improve their reading skills and vice versa.

Within an environment, where children are offered opportunities for self-expression and their creativity is enhanced, according to the balanced approach to teaching the written language, the mastery of reading and writing focuses on the social dimension and nature of the written language (Tracey, 2016). The text is recognized as a basic unit of communication and teaching of reading and writing, the understanding and production of written language is achieved by reading and writing texts that have interest, meaning, value and purpose for children.

When children have a goal, they acquire skills and produce speech, oral and written, that in other cases they fail to put into practice. Children’s participation in targeted learning practices of different discourses, mediated by note-taking systems involving the written word, significantly enhances and supports literacy (Tracey & Morrow, 2007).

The practices with which the teachers implement (more or less) the theoretical principles and teaching approaches of literacy are described as practices for strengthening and/or teaching early literacy. Enhancing literacy and teaching it are complex and demanding processes.

According to NICHHD (2000: 15):

“Teaching reading comprehension strategies to students at all grade levels is complex. Teachers not only must have a firm grasp of the content presented in text, but also must have substantial knowledge of the strategies themselves, of which strategies are most effective for different students and types of content and of how best to teach and model strategy use”.

It is also important that teachers stay up-to-date on research on effective teaching strategies. Therefore, teaching reading and enhancing literacy require a wide range of skills and abilities that must be acquired during initial teacher education and continuously improved through training programs in the context of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (Eurydice, 2011).

In summary, in the context of a balanced program the communicative dimension of the language is enabled to function as a transition process from the ability to write and read to a higher level of meaning through targeted practices, such as:
• a rich printed language environment;
• opportunities to choose and control what they want to read enhance children’s motivation, creativity, autonomy and self-concept;
• opportunities for participatory reading and writing;
• challenges to improve children’s self-esteem by completing a challenge;
• opportunities for collaboration and social interaction within a social context enhance knowledge, strengthen motivation and increase achievement;
• opportunities for reflection and metacognitive approaches, children are empowered with processes of self-control, independence, self-esteem, etc.) (Apostolou, 2021).
• Within such a pedagogical framework, students can function seamlessly in mastering literacy, overcoming difficulties and obstacles that may arise from the adoption of incorrect practices.

Based on the above and attempting an overview of literacy pedagogy, in conclusion, it could be said that students’ language acquisitions seem to be clearly better when they are integrated into the context of a balanced approach to literacy.

**Balanced Literacy Approach in Greek Early Childhood Education Classes**

With regard to the adoption of the balanced literacy approach in early childhood education classes, recent research by Apostolou (2021) demonstrates that kindergarten teachers at the level of recording perceptions deposit (unconsciously) the knowledge of the principles of balancing as very important for enhancing literacy and language teaching. However, at the level of recording their practices, the adoption of one and only one teaching approach at a time is highlighted as the most suitable for their classes.

Trying to define literacy practices, language, reading, and writing are generally considered to be interrelated processes that correspond to emergent literacy in children ages 0 to 6 (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Through quality educational practices and a well-structured and organized educational environment of the classroom the child's engagement in emergent literacy development and learning situations can be supported (Baroody & Diamond, 2016). In this context,
the educational environment includes the physical dimension (classroom layout, resources, books, writing materials) as well as the interactive dimension (teacher and child interactions) (Guo et al., 2010). Child engagement refers to interactions with the teacher, peers and his or her involvement within tasks and activities (Downer et al., 2010).

Teaching approach based on the use of authentic communication situations and utilizing a variety of authentic texts emerges as the most prevalent, theoretically and practically, for kindergarten teachers. Practices based on learning to code and cultivating technical skills to master literacy emerged as those that can function adjunctively or on a case-by-case basis to strengthen, consolidate and assess literacy in their classrooms. At this point, research data from the international field should be mentioned that show that kindergarten students who are introduced to code learning practices systematically succeed later in primary school and their transition to it is facilitated (see in Aram, 2005; Shatil & Share, 2003; Zhang et al., 2013). Kindergarten teachers who systematically adopt in their classrooms learning practices based on authentic communicative situations combined with “breaking the code” practices seem to be aware of and aware of the findings of these investigations (Apostolou, 2021).

Literature review (e.g., Apostolou, 2021; Campana et al., 2016; Kondylis & Stellakis, 2006; Paris, 2005; Scull et al., 2013; Tracey & Morrow, 2007; Xefteris, 2017; Xue & Meisels, 2004) mention that preschool teachers adopt, in such a way, a combination of approaches related on the one hand to practices, such as taking into account children’s interests and knowledge (emergent literacy), extracting and rendering meaning from a text, etc. (communicative approach) and on the other hand technical skills, such as phonological awareness, decoding, etc. (conventional literacy). Spoken and written language are placed on a continuum, within which they take various forms and produce various forms of linguistic behavior that are shaped by the social environment. The strengthening of natural literacy in early childhood education classes and the teaching of school literacy in elementary school are related to where, by whom, to whom and why they are applied. Teachers, as mediators of literacy (Baynham, 1995; Kucer, 2009) and at the same time performing many other roles of varying intensity and power, undertake to support the difficult task of language teaching by making the right choices (Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019).
Summarizing and with clear reference to all of the above, literacy balancing as a mix of language teaching traditions for the enhancement of natural literacy and the teaching of school literacy must be understood in Greek early childhood classes and adopted by preschool teachers. We could state that teachers, by way of exception or deviation from what is indicated through the official texts, they carry out their own educational act in dialogue with their teaching identity but also with the identities of their students (Apostolou et al., 2020).

In this context, the need for continuous, substantial, systematic and targeted training of kindergarten teachers in literacy issues arises (Apostolou, 2021). It also highlights the need to clarify and enrich the theoretical principles and methodological guidelines of the official texts with clear references to the balanced approach to literacy.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Teaching aimed at developing reading comprehension must be complex and contain the development of decoding skills, whole word recognition, vocabulary enrichment, specific reading comprehension skills and use in a sociocultural context (Aidinis, introduction to Smith, 2006). A balanced literacy program includes various reading and writing experiences, of which teachers can choose according to classroom conditions, needs and developmental stages of children (Tracey & Morrow, 2007).

Based on the assumption that for the strengthening of literacy and the teaching of the language, a decisive role is played by the school environment, the teacher is recognized as the most important of all factors for language teaching. As school environment and teacher’s role is co-shaped by a series of socio-cultural factors of varying strength that influence and determine the type of literacy that is promoted in a school classroom (educational, student identity, family, locality, syllabus, school textbooks, etc.), during the last years an attempt was made to make visible the way in which they shape their teaching choices.

It is expected, therefore, that the teachers have realized the common lines and directions of the two programs and have adopted the principles of balancing in the strengthening of literacy and in the teaching of the language, aligning the different social paths, the different identities that meet and interact within school classes (Apostolou, 2021).
Although, balanced literacy is accepted and highlighted as the most appropriate method for literacy cultivation, the strong locality of Greek education (analytical and synthetic method, obsession with traditional teaching methods, school textbook, educational identity, student identity) still seem to be in some way an obstacle for its application.

However, in recent years a lot of effort, collaborations, training and new educational policies and regulations taking place in order to make balanced literacy known to all teachers as the most modern and appropriate method. It seems to be accepted that this method compensates for inequalities, inadequacies and bridge the gap that exists between pre-school and primary school education. All these requirements, sought and realized, seem able to contribute to the prevalence of the balanced literacy approach in early childhood education.

**ADHERENCE TO ETHICAL STANDARDS**

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**Consent for publication.** The authors approve of this submission and, conditional upon the decision made by the editorial board from the peer-review process, consent to the publication of the current work. The work has not been, nor has it been submitted to other journals in consideration for publication.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Вступ. У статті зроблено спробу критичного аналізу проблеми набуття грамотності дітьми дошкільного віку за допомогою збалансованого підходу до навчання грамоти – змішаного методу, який поєднує в собі елементи методу з акцентом на код та методів з акцентом на значенні. Зокрема, представлено наочні приклади збалансованого підходу до навчання грамотності, як це відбувається (або не відбувається) на заняттях у грецьких дошкільних освітніх закладах.

Мета. Окремі питання, виклики та перспективи, які відкриває цей метод, розглядаються у порівнянні та відповідно до традиційного і застарілого розуміння поняття “грамотність”, яке пов’язане з навчанням читання та письма. Акцент зроблено на сильних і слабких сторонах збалансованого підходу до навчання грамотності, щоб висвітлити перспективи його застосування в освіті дітей раннього віку в більш широкому масштабі.

Результати. Піднімаються питання і висловлюється занепокоєння щодо розширення і застосування методу та його прийняття грецькими вихователями дитячих садків. Однак відображено необхідність застосування збалансованого підходу до навчання грамоти на заняттях з дошкільної освіти, як єдиного методу, що поєдnuє, приймає і використовує елементи багатьох методів, здатного запропонувати маленьким дітям достатні ресурси в процесі оволодіння грамотністю. Під сумовуючи та чітко посилаючись на вищесказане, можна зазначити, що балансування грамотності як поєднання традицій викладання мови і збалансованого підходу має бути зрозумілим у грецьких класах для дітей раннього віку та прийнятим педагогами дошкільних закладів. Можна стверджувати, що педагоги, виключаючи або відхиляючи від того, що зазначено в офіційних текстах, здійснюють власний освітній акт у діалогі зі своєю педагогічною ідентичністю, а також з ідентичностями своїх дітей (Apostolou et al., 2020).

У цьому контексті виникає потреба в безперервній, грунтовацій, систематичній і цілеспрямованій підготовці вихователів дитячих садків з питань грамотності (Apostolou, 2021). Це також підкреслює необхідність уточнення та збагачення теоретичних засад і методичних рекомендацій офіційних текстів чіткими посиланнями на збалансований підхід до грамотності.

Висновки. Виходячи з припущень, що для зміцнення грамотності та навчання мови вирішальну роль відіграє дошкільне середовище, педагог визнається найважливішим з усіх факторів навчання мови. Освітянське середовище і роль педагога формуються під впливом низки соціокультурних чинників різної сили, які впливають і визначають тип грамотності, що пропагується в шкільному класі (освіта, особистість учня, сім’я, місцевість, навчальна програма, шкільні підручники тощо), протягом останніх років була зроблена спроба простежити, яким чином вони впливають на вибір вчителем методів викладання.

Ключові слова: дошкільна освіта, мова, збалансована грамотність, читання, письмо.