

## **Mapping the Impact of Economic Crisis on Greek Education: Teachers' Views and Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

*The present study, which is part of the research project entitled “Teacher Support Confronting Social Inequalities” (TOCSIN), aims at investigating the consequences of the economic crisis on the vulnerable population at early childhood education schools (children aged from four to nine years old). In particular, the study explores the effects of economic crisis on children and school units in Greek public schools as well as the practices that educators may implement to cope with the problems arisen in the school environment because of the economic crisis. The data were collected through a researcher-designed questionnaire administered to the school principals. Three hundred sixteen (316) school principals of Greek kindergartens and primary schools participated in the research. The results of the study indicated that children have difficulties in feeding, clothing/footwear, in participating in school activities (e.g., excursions, museum visits) and extra-curricular activities (e.g., foreign language classes, dance lessons), and in buying the necessary school material. Regarding the effects of economic crisis on the function of schools, they mostly have to do with the renewal of technological equipment and building maintenance. Simultaneously, the results revealed that teachers' practices that seem to be more common among school units are the reduction in student stationery and materials, the implementations of education programs offering students emotional support the collaboration with other organizations, such as the Municipality, Church, social groceries, and the frequent contact with the Parents' Association of the school unit. The results of the study are further discussed, while future research is suggested.*

**Keywords:** Effects of economic crisis, Greek primary education, early childhood education, function of school units, teachers' views, teachers' practices.

### **Introduction**

The global economic crisis that started from America in the years 2008-2009 has affected the lives of many individuals and families, particularly, the weakest members of society, such as the poor, the elderly and the children. The effects of economic recession can be overwhelming not only on people's well-being, physical and mental health but also on school units (Kokkevi, Stavrou, Kanavou, & Fotiou, 2014).

Greece is one of the countries that has been severely affected by the economic crisis, as unemployment, job insecurity, poverty, tax imposing, austerity measures, and cuts in salaries and health expenditure are among the most visible and detrimental outcomes of the economic crisis (Galanaki, 2015a). According to recent Eurostat measurements\* in 2014, more than 1/3 of Greek population lives below poverty line.

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\* [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People\\_at\\_risk\\_of\\_poverty\\_or\\_social\\_exclusion](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion)

Greece is included among the countries with the highest poverty levels, following Bulgaria and Romania. In addition, the annual report of the Hellenic National Committee of UNICEF (Galanaki, 2015b) indicated that there was a significant increase in the number of children who experienced poverty in 2013 (556,000 or 28.8% of the total number of children) when compared to the respective number in 2009 (452,000 or 23.7% of the total number of children). Parental unemployment causes negative sentiments in family members and serious restrictions in the family recreational activities and considerably limits the access to learning. Moreover, there are frequent reports in the press describing incidents of children losing their senses in the school due to lack of nutrition or cases where children cannot afford to purchase the basic school equipment. The continuously increasing number of students that cannot cover their basic needs leads to negative consequences on student academic performance and to the increase in social inequalities (Gouvias, Katsis, & Limakopoulou, 2012) and hampers students' access to upper high education (Sianou - Kyrgiou, 2006).

In periods of crisis, teachers' role becomes even more important, especially when children of low socio-economic levels are mostly affected (Apple, 2010). Relying on their professional and educational role, they have to search and locate the children that suffer most from the negative effects of the economic crisis and find solutions, which will allow children to learn and develop. However, research has shown that teachers have difficulties in managing the social inequalities, which they can overcome if they are educated in the use of specialized tools and methods (Askouni, 2004). The school environment, especially early childhood education (4-8 years), where one can locate any kind of inequality and adversity, constitutes the most suitable age during which interventions and prevention educational programs can be designed and implemented, which can ensure children's social and emotional prosperity and educational progress (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006; Nores & Barnett, 2010). In addition to complementing family's role and helping the child's transition from the family to the school environment, early interventions can deter social discriminations, inequalities and future problems, such as school abandonment. Within this framework, the teacher's role in designing and implementing suitable intervention programs is really important.

### **The Effects of Economic Crisis on Children's Lives**

The effects of poverty on children's lives have been the focus of many studies indicating that its outcomes can be visible and overwhelming mainly on early childhood education children, females or children coming from lower socio-economic families (Doliopoulou, 2015; Shafiq, 2010). According to Doliopoulou (2015), poverty can be defined as the deprivation of the bare essentials of life due to lack of money to make ends meet. More specifically, research indicated that poverty can negatively affect children's intelligence, performance and adaptation at school as well as their overall cognitive and socio-sentimental development (Doliopoulou, 2015; Galanaki, 2015b). Similarly, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) in a series of studies showed that children who live in poverty suffer from health problems because of malnutrition and are highly likely to experience learning difficulties, developmental retardation and behavioral problems; they also added that poverty can have negative effects on children cognitive skills and performance at school highlighting that the younger the children experience poverty, the more overwhelming the effects on their cognitive skills are. In addition, it was shown that poverty when experienced during childhood could detrimentally affect children educational attainment (Shafiq, 2010); in particular, he revealed that the decrease in parental salaries and the simultaneous increase in their working hours made parents unable to spend money on tutoring sessions, buying books or educational materials and time on helping their children with the homework or any other educational activity, which results in children employment and dropping out school. A similar finding was also reported by Galanaki (2015b) pointing out that the decrease in family affluence reduces parents' involvement in their children performance and progress at school as well as their interest in participating in school activities (e.g., meetings with teachers at school).

Moreover, the increasing parental unemployment that leads to the decrease in family salary and well-being causes family tensions, arguments and changes in everyday life, such as moving to smaller houses, living together with relatives, difficulties in affording food, reduction in private tutoring sessions, and cutting down on holidays; in conjunction with the decrease in private tutoring sessions, students reported an overall decline in the school pressure as well (Kokkevi et al., 2014). In addition, a close association was shown between the psychological problems that children suffer during their childhood and the difficulties in finding a job in the near future highlighting that children that suffer from stress at the age of 14 are more likely to have difficulties in finding a job than their peers who had less stress, which can be more visible in times of economic crisis (Egan, Daly, & Delaney, 2015).

Some years ago, a study conducted by the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (YPEPTH & Planet, 2007) concurs with the above findings revealing that factors, such as poverty and unemployment, are inextricably linked to children dropping out school, as children are either forced to work at an early age to help their families make ends meet or cannot afford to go on attending school because of the economic problems their families face that are unable to provide their children with the necessary support and help. These are some of the indicative problems that a number of children and educators face in Greece in their daily lives; more often than not, the latter need to confront problems, such as children difficulties in having access to food, buying the necessary school materials or participating in school activities (e.g., school trips) (Galanaki, 2015b).

### ***The Effects of Economic Crisis on the Function of School Units***

It goes without saying that the economic recession affected the function of school units, as, according to the report of OECD (2013), there was a reduction in the money spent on education between 2009 and 2010 and the educators' salaries in 12 of the 25 countries-members between 2009 and 2011. In particular, research indicated that some of the problems that educators experienced because of the economic crisis were the decrease in job vacancies (Alexiou, 2012; Ziontaki, 2014) and educators' salaries (Doliopoulou, 2015; Karkkainen, 2010; OECD, 2013), the simultaneous increase in the working hours and the lack of staff, appropriate building, equipment and office supplies (Alexiou, 2012). Similar problems were also revealed by Galanaki (2015b) highlighting that a large number of schools face a lack of staff, technological equipment, and remedial teaching as well as an increase in the number of students per classroom because of the school merging. In addition, Mouza and Souchamvali (2015) found that primary education teachers experience a lot of stress because of the salary decline, the professional uncertainty, and the potential of assessment.

Given that the economic crisis can have various overwhelming effects on people's lives and education, further research is needed on its effects, the policies and interventions implemented in schools with the aim of moderating and facing the problems that children experience because of the economic recession. Allowing for the above literature review, the present study, which is part of the research project entitled "Teacher Support Confronting Social Inequalities" (TOCSIN), aims at investigating the consequences of the economic crisis on the vulnerable population at early childhood education schools (children aged from four to nine years old). In particular, TOCSIN explores the possible difficulties that educators face in Greece because of the economic crisis and the practices that educators may implement to support children and their families that suffer most from the consequences of the economic crisis through questionnaires and interviews conducted in the school principals. Another aim of the research project is to construct an electronic platform including educational materials and good practices, which will be open to teachers, schools and anyone interested in dealing with current social and financial inequalities experienced in Greece. The research project has been co-financed by the General Secretariat for Research and Technology through the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area (EEA) (FM GR07 / 3708). The prioritized areas of the research program are those of national inequalities and social exclusion in Greece as a result of the ongoing economic crisis.

### ***Research Questions***

The present study aims to explore:

- a) the effects of economic crisis on children and school units in Greek public schools and
- b) teachers' good practices in their effort to cope with the problems arisen in the school environment because of the economic crisis

More precisely, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the difficulties that Greek teachers face because of the economic crisis?
- What are the teachers' practices that they possibly implement to support children and their families?

### ***Methodology***

#### **Participants**

Three hundred sixteen (316) school principals of Greek kindergartens and primary schools participated in the research, where 102 (32.3%) were male and 214 (67.7%) female; the participants had a mean of 22.84 years of previous professional experience in education and a mean of 8.57 years of previous experience in an administrative position in a school unit.

28% of the 316 participants hold a Master's Degree, 7.3% hold a Doctoral Degree and 25.3% hold a second Bachelor's Degree in addition to that in Education. Regarding the school units, 163 (51.6%) were kindergartens and 153 (48.4%) were primary schools, while most of them (85.1%) were all-day schools with longer school hours and an enriched curriculum. Of the 316 school units, whose administrators participated in the study, 165 (52.2%) were in the Prefecture of Attica, 90 (28.5%) in the Prefecture of Thessaloniki, 44 (13.9%) in the Prefecture of Magnesia and 17 (5.4%) in other Greek Prefectures. Table 1 presents the population of students in the 316 school units.

**Table 1: The Population of Students in the 316 School Units**

| <b>Region</b> | <b>Kindergarten students</b> | <b>1st, 2nd and 3rd Grade students</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------|
| Attica        | 3,126                        | 8,561                                  | 11,687       |
| Thessaloniki  | 1,898                        | 4,537                                  | 6,435        |
| Magnesia      | 493                          | 1,562                                  | 2,055        |
| Other regions | 171                          | 410                                    | 581          |
| Total         | 5,688                        | 15,070                                 | 20,758       |

### **Data Collection Instrument**

A researcher-designed questionnaire was used to collect the data of the study based on research evidence (see above) that refer to the multiple effects of economic crisis on children and education. The aim of the questionnaire was twofold: a) to investigate the effects of economic crisis on children and school units in Greek public schools and b) to highlight teachers' good practices in their effort to cope with the problems arisen in the school environment because of the economic crisis. More specifically, the questionnaire (see <http://tocsin.uth.gr/en> for the English version of the questionnaire) that was filled-in by the school administrators consisted of 30 closed-ended Likert-type questions (from 1 to 5) and some open-ended ones and was divided into 4 sections:

- General information (demographics)
- Quantitative depiction of the impact of the economic crisis on children and school units.
- The impact of economic crisis on the educational process and everyday life management in schools.
- Suggestions to confront with the difficulties.

Namely, the first part mainly included demographic questions (information related to the administrator, the school unit and the school population). The next three parts aimed to investigate: a) the effects of economic crisis on children (learning performance, basic need cover, school event attendance etc) and the function of school units (quality of educational work, school need cover, such as heating, school building maintenance, education supplies etc), b) the differences in the frequency of appearance of repercussions and/or the confrontation of problems in relation to the various characteristics of the sample and c) the practices implemented in the school units to cope with the various problems arisen because of the economic crisis.

The questionnaire was administered through the digital platform of the research programme (<http://tocsin.uth.gr/node/16>) to facilitate school administrators' participation in the completion process, regardless of the school location in each Prefecture. The participation in the study optional, while there was an available option/answer "I do not know / I do not answer" that all participants could select.

### **Procedure**

The research was conducted in public kindergartens and primary schools of three (3) Greek Prefectures (Attica, Thessaloniki and Magnesia). These Prefectures were intentionally chosen, as the scientific supervisors of the project work in these regions; therefore, it would be easier for them to have access to as many school units as possible and have as many school administrators as possible participate in the study. In order to implement the study, a permit was asked for (no. 59/10-12-2015 act) by the Administrative Board of the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) of the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. After that, the research team sent informational letters to the school units and announced the scope of the research on social media (facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TOCSIN.PROJECT.EU/>) to make the public aware of the objectives and the methodology of the research project allowing for the code of ethics. This public announcement motivated 17 administrators from other Greek Prefectures to fill in the questionnaire as well.

The total data collection was carried out in two phases, the quantitative and qualitative part: a) initially, the school administrators had to register the platform <http://tocsin.uth.gr> using the email address of their school and then, fill-in the electronic questionnaire, b) after careful selection, about 40 administrators were interviewed to give more descriptive information about the impact of economic crisis and the good practices they implement to face the crisis effects. The research procedure lasted from the beginning of February to the end of March 2016. However, this study focuses only on the quantitative data collection.

### Findings

The data analysis was conducted using the SPSS statistical analysis software. The presentation of the results is according to the parts of the questionnaire.

### Economic Crisis Effects on Children

According to the answers provided by the administrators, some effects were more intense in some school units, while others were observed in fewer schools. The main negative effect that they spot, especially after 2010, is related to the children's reduced participation in school activities (e.g., excursions), as 68% of the participants supported it (see Table 2). Other negative effects of the economic crisis are related to children feeding (49.4%) and clothing/footwear (46.8%), although the answers are somewhat divided between Yes and No. On the contrary, they do not seem to observe problems regarding the children's participation in the school every day program (68.4%) or their correspondence to school's learning activities (55%). Finally, 8% - 10% of the participants claim that they have not noticed any of the effects mentioned in the questionnaire.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistical Analysis of the Administrators' Estimates regarding the Effects of Economic Crisis on Children**

| Effects                                              | Answer                | N = 316 | %     |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|
| Feeding                                              | Yes                   | 156     | 49.40 |
|                                                      | No                    | 134     | 42.40 |
|                                                      | I have not noticed it | 26      | 8.20  |
| Clothing/Footwear                                    | Yes                   | 148     | 46.80 |
|                                                      | No                    | 134     | 42.40 |
|                                                      | I have not noticed it | 34      | 10.80 |
| Attending school program                             | Yes                   | 72      | 22.80 |
|                                                      | No                    | 216     | 68.40 |
|                                                      | I have not noticed it | 28      | 8.90  |
| Participation in learning activities                 | Yes                   | 114     | 36.10 |
|                                                      | No                    | 174     | 55.10 |
|                                                      | I have not noticed it | 28      | 8.90  |
| Participation in school activities (excursions, etc) | Yes                   | 215     | 68.00 |
|                                                      | No                    | 94      | 29.70 |
|                                                      | I have not noticed it | 7       | 2.20  |

Following the open-ended questions, the administrators could give more detailed answers on the effects of economic crisis on children. Some indicative answers are presented below:

- *"Some parents face economic problems when they need to buy consumables for educational activities (cardboard, glues, crayons etc.)"*
- *"We (the teachers) pay the tickets (for a school educational visit) of those children that can't afford it".*
- *"...and all the within-school and extracurricular activities are provided with no financial participation from the students".*

The quantitative imprinting of the effects of economic crisis on children shows the size of problems more clearly. Table 3 presents the most frequent problems that children seem to face. As one can see, 10% of the families seem to face serious economic problems, while unemployment and a general instability and insecurity in the labour sector affect more families, especially infants' families (20.44%) in relation to primary school children's families (15.33%). Furthermore, differences between kindergarten and primary school students are spotted in their ability to obtain the necessary school materials with the former having more difficulties (9.81%) than the latter (7.66%).

This could possibly mean that parents, despite their economic problems, find ways to pay for primary school materials, because they probably believe that primary education is more important than pre-school education. Furthermore, infants seem to face more difficulties in obtaining costumes, accessories or any other type of clothing for the school needs or events than primary students (12.28% vs 8.7%). However, more primary students' parents (10.75%) have difficulty paying for extracurricular activities (e.g., painting, dancing, sports or foreign language learning classes) than infant parents (9.46%). Finally, the findings show that behavioral problems, psychological problems, problems of serious malnutrition, social exclusion and frequent absences are extremely rare (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Quantitative Imprinting of Repercussions of Economic Crisis on Children**

| Effects                                                                                                                                                             | Type of school unit | Number of children | Percentage of the total student sample (%) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Families facing unemployment (with one or two parents being unemployed)                                                                                             | Kindergarten        | 1,123              | 20.44                                      |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 2,247              | 15.33                                      |
| Children facing serious economic difficulties in their family                                                                                                       | Kindergarten        | 529                | 9.62                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 1,470              | 10.03                                      |
| Children facing difficulties to obtain the necessary school materials                                                                                               | Kindergarten        | 539                | 9.81                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 1,123              | 7.66                                       |
| Children facing difficulties to buy costumes, accessories or any other type of clothing for the school needs or events                                              | Kindergarten        | 675                | 12.28                                      |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 1,275              | 8.7                                        |
| Children whose parents that can't afford to participate in extra-curricular activities, such as painting, dancing, sports or foreign language learning classes etc) | Kindergarten        | 520                | 9.46                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 1,576              | 10.75                                      |
| Children that have difficulties in clothing (old clothes, inappropriate for the season clothes, lack of clothing)                                                   | Kindergarten        | 288                | 5.24                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 918                | 6.26                                       |
| Children that do not have the proper equipment to participate in school activities (e.g., trainers, tracksuits)                                                     | Kindergarten        | 264                | 4.80                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 847                | 5.78                                       |
| Children that do not have a health insurance                                                                                                                        | Kindergarten        | 175                | 3.18                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 636                | 4.34                                       |
| Children that have fainted due to lack of food                                                                                                                      | Kindergarten        | 5                  | .09                                        |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 28                 | .19                                        |
| Children with economic problems that are often absent from school                                                                                                   | Kindergarten        | 91                 | 1.66                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 212                | 1.45                                       |
| Children with economic problems that have changed their behavior at school                                                                                          | Kindergarten        | 125                | 2.28                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 582                | 3.97                                       |
| Children with economic problems that are often distracted                                                                                                           | Kindergarten        | 158                | 2.88                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 639                | 4.36                                       |
| Children with economic problems that discuss them in school/class                                                                                                   | Kindergarten        | 280                | 5.10                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 471                | 3.21                                       |
| Parents with economic difficulties that mention any sentimental or/and behavioral problems their children have                                                      | Kindergarten        | 162                | 2.95                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 501                | 3.42                                       |
| Children with economic problems that are under a lot of pressure/stress                                                                                             | Kindergarten        | 98                 | 1.78                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 449                | 3.06                                       |
| Children with economic problems that experience social exclusion                                                                                                    | Kindergarten        | 25                 | .46                                        |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 115                | .78                                        |
| Children that have difficulties in attending lessons and responding to the demands of the learning activities in class                                              | Kindergarten        | 121                | 2.20                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 412                | 2.81                                       |
| Children with economic problems that have repeated the same class                                                                                                   | Kindergarten        | 29                 | .53                                        |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 86                 | .59                                        |
| Children who have been diagnosed with learning difficulties by KE.D.D.Y. and do not receive specialized help and support because of economic problems               | Kindergarten        | 106                | 1.93                                       |
|                                                                                                                                                                     | A, B, C class       | 219                | 1.49                                       |

To sum up, the main repercussions of economic crisis on children are related to their attendance at various activities, either in the school context (excursions, visits, events, etc), or extracurricular activities (tutorials, foreign language classes, dance lessons, etc), along with their difficulty in buying the necessary school material or other accessories asked by the teaching staff each year.

Up to now, despite the serious economic problems that parents might face because of the general instability and insecurity in the labor sector, they appear to correspond and meet their children's basic demands (nutrition, clothing, and medical care) and protect them emotionally and psychologically.

### ***Economic Crisis Effects on School Units***

Regarding the effects of economic crisis on school units (see Table 4), they are mainly related to their ability to obtain or renew their equipment and the educational visual aids ( $M=3.3$ ,  $SD=1.3$ ), where most answers were between "So-so" and "Serious". Moreover, the school building maintenance, the purchase of office supplies and the function of all-day school (up to 4:00 p.m.) appear to be connected to the economic crisis to a lower extent. On the contrary, issues like building heating and children transportation do not appear to be that problematic based on the administrators' answers.

**Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of the Administrators' Assessment of Economic Crisis Effects on the Function of School Units**

| Effects on school unit(1=Not serious.... 5=Very serious)                            | <i>M (SD)</i> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Equipment and visual aids                                                           | 3.3 (1.3)     |
| Building maintenance                                                                | 3.1 (1.3)     |
| Stationery (e.g., paper, ink)                                                       | 2.9 (1.4)     |
| Function of all-day school (e.g., materials, staff)                                 | 2.7 (1.6)     |
| Children's safety in buildings (e.g. damage at schools, badly-maintained buildings) | 2.3 (1.2)     |
| Security                                                                            | 2.1 (1.7)     |
| Lack of staff (e.g., foreign language teachers)                                     | 2.1 (1.5)     |
| Increase in student population                                                      | 2.1 (1.4)     |
| Cleaning                                                                            | 2.1 (1.2)     |
| Students' transportation                                                            | 1.9 (1.5)     |
| Heating of the school building                                                      | 1.7 (1.1)     |

Some indicative answers the administrators gave to the open- ended questions regarding the effects of economic crisis are presented below:

- "We do not have enough visual aids"
- " Building maintenance (e.g., painting)"
- "The last two years the 3<sup>rd</sup> class in our kindergarten hasn't worked because of the lack of staff"
- "We cannot afford to buy things like detergents and stationeries"
- "... The big number of children per class due to the lack of teachers"
- "The teaching of courses where the use of new technologies and generally the use of technological equipment... The equipment is old and not easily renewed".

### **Administrators' Views on the Consequences of Economic Crisis on the Educational Process and the Confrontation of Educational Everyday Life before and after 2010**

The data analysis revealed that, according to the administrators' views, the main negative effect of economic crisis on the education process is the children's participation in the school activities (visiting museums, one-day excursions, theatre performances, etc) ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ), followed by the their concentration on and response to the school duties ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD=1$ ). Other consequences, such as their learning motives, participation in the educational process, consistency in attending school, absenteeism (stopping school attendance), learning outcomes/performance, have not been considered to be serious. In another question, administrators were asked whether the difficulties in the communication between school and families have increased the last few years because of the economic crisis, when compared with the one before the crisis ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ). The administrators attribute the problems of the communication with the parents mainly to the disappointment they feel because of the economic crisis ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) and the pressure they are under in order to meet their children's demands for participation in the school life (e.g., school bag, stationery, daily brunch) and the extracurricular life ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1$ ), while they attribute this problem less to the parents' inability to be present at school and frequently contact with teachers ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). Some of their answers to the open- ended question about the causes of this problematic communication are presented below:

- *"Their economic problems prevail and they cannot deal with their child's progress"*
- *"They are psychologically pressured, they have difficulty talking about their (economic) problems, they are stressed and quarrelsome"*
- *"I believe that parents have lost their interest in their children's education due to the problems they face. What they expect more from the school is to safeguard their children, and they are not willing to offer something more, and that is why they do not participate in events, such as teacher- parent meetings, feasts, events, cooperative works, visits, etc".*

The effects of economic crisis on the educational process have so far been mentioned, without, however, referring to the factors that have led to them. Thus, according to the administrators' estimates the main reason that has influenced the quality of educational work is the reduction in training opportunities (e.g., closure of teaching training centers, lack of educational and training programs at Regional Training Centers) ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), followed by the feeling of insecurity about their job ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Other less significant factors are the ambiguous framework of teacher assessment ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) and the abolition of teacher sabbatical leave to attend post-graduate programs or conduct a PhD ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). Finally, factors like the decrease in salaries ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), the increase in student population ( $M = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ), the change in the composition of student population ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) seem to influence the whole situation less.

In accordance with the qualitative findings, in the open-ended question, the administrators also referred to the teachers' bad psychological and emotional situation (*"The psychological climate created in the environment, the misery that you breathe in every step you take, the sadness in the people's faces"*), the decrease in the school finances (*"We cannot equip our kindergarten with the suitable means to organize our activities. There are no money for office supplies, books, toys, etc, and so we had to reduce our activities and the quality of the education level, and so everything now is based on our imagination, creativity and good will"*), the reduced training opportunities (*"The training is important for the teachers' evolution and it is an economic burden for those who are trained via University Programs, in which, though we wish to participate, we cannot afford to pay the cost"*). In conclusion, it seems that the economic crisis has influenced the quality of education, since children do not participate in school excursions and visits, the communication between teachers and parents has become problematic, and teachers have reduced training opportunities, along with the insecurity in their working field.

### **Teachers' Practices Implemented in the School unit to Cope with the Effects of the Economic Crisis**

In the fourth part of the questionnaire administrators were asked to refer to practices they probably implement in order to face the difficulties (children, school unit, educational work) because of the economic crisis. As one can see in Table 5, it appears that they do take some actions ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), though, when asked about an individual action, they did not frequently chose the answers "Quite a lot" and "Very much".

More precisely, the actions that seem to be more common among school units are the reduction in student stationery and materials ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ), the implementations of education programs offering students emotional support ( $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ), the collaboration with other organizations, such as the Municipality, Church, social groceries, and so on. ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) and the frequent contact with the Parents' Association of the school unit ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ).



**Table 5: Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Teachers' Practices Implemented in the School Units in order to Cope with the Effects of Economic Crisis**

| School actions (1=Not at all... 5=Very much)                                                                                 | Mean (SD) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Attempts made at the school to cope with the economic difficulties that students and their families face                     | 3.1 (1.2) |
| Providing families with financial support (e.g., bazaars, charities)                                                         | 2.3 (1.2) |
| Meals at school                                                                                                              | 1.8 (1.3) |
| The teacher takes care of his/her student brunch                                                                             | 2 (1.2)   |
| Remedial teaching to boost student performance                                                                               | 2.4 (1.2) |
| Reduce in student stationery and materials                                                                                   | 3.4 (1.1) |
| Programs offering students emotional support                                                                                 | 3.3 (1.3) |
| More frequent contact with the Parents' Association in an attempt to find solutions to the problems or vacancies for parents | 3.1 (1.3) |
| Further teacher learning/ personal study to find ways of confronting the consequences of the economic crisis on education    | 2.2 (1)   |
| Contact-cooperation with other schools                                                                                       | 2.6 (1.1) |
| Contact-cooperation with other organizations (Municipality, Prefecture, Charities, Church etc)                               | 3.2 (1.2) |
| Cooperation with solidarity network                                                                                          | 2.3 (1.3) |
| Demands for sponsorships                                                                                                     | 2.6 (1.3) |
| Participation in European programs                                                                                           | 1.6 (1.1) |

When asked to give more details about their actions, some of the administrators referred to "the food that is provided to the students into the school unit, which is an action accomplished with the cooperation of two other schools (a primary and a high school) that participate in nutrition programs. In this way, we can provide a snack and lunch to six families on a daily basis for a period of nine months", the fact that "the teacher covers with her own expenses some children's participation in educational activities, when they cannot afford to do so", and the "offers from freelance businessmen".

Finally, when asked to mention what would help them better cope with the new reality regarding the daily educational process or function of schools, the administrators referred to the increase in the funding by the Municipality ( $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=.90$ ), followed by the provision of free-of-charge creative activities to students ( $M=4.1$ ,  $SD=.90$ ), the implementation of educational programs focusing on pedagogical issues and ways of confronting problems caused by the economic crisis ( $M=3.9$ ,  $SD=.90$ ), the diffusion of good practices implemented by various school units ( $M=3.9$ ,  $SD=.90$ ), the existence of a website including information about social organizations, networks, partners etc ( $M=3.7$ ,  $SD=1$ ), and finally the development of electronic networks of teacher communication ( $M=3.3$ ,  $SD=1$ ).

Some of their indicative answers to the open-ended question regarding their suggestions are presented below:

- "I would propose training in a recreational way, programs for parents that would educate them as well as helping them get away from the everyday routine...".
- "Collaboration with members and organizations of the wider community".
- "Social worker or psychologists' visits to the school, meetings with parents and children, monitoring of various incidents, teachers support.

To sum up, the administrators' practices mainly focused on the reduction in stationeries and material requirements, the establishment of a more frequent contact with the Parents' Association and other organizations. Furthermore, they appear to accept almost all offers for support, which will help them cope with everyday difficulties and ameliorate the situation.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The present study, part of the research project TOCSIN, aims to investigate the effects of economic crisis on the vulnerable population at early childhood education schools and teachers' good practices in the attempt to cope with the problems arisen in the school environment. The data were collected through a questionnaire administered to school principals. According to the results of the study, most principals (2/3) mentioned that the economic crisis mainly affected student participation in the school activities (e.g., school trips). Moreover, half of the principals referred to the difficulties that students face in feeding, clothing and footwear (e.g., lack of food, old clothes, inappropriate for the season clothes, lack of clothing). At the same time, the results of the study indicated that parents' unemployment is a serious problem that one out of the five families faces.

Namely, 10% of the children have difficulties in buying the necessary school equipment and participating in school and extracurricular activities that require money payment, which concurs with previous research (Galanaki, 2015b). It is estimated that these students mostly come from families from lower socioeconomic status that live below poverty line. Though this percentage is lower than the one (36%) estimated by the Eurostat measurements (2014) and is not based on economic figures, it refers to the direct effects of the economic crisis on children indicating the real difficulties that children go through because of the economic crisis. Based on the principals' answers, students have difficulties mainly in participating in school and extracurricular activities, as they cannot afford to do so, which constitute a link between school activities and student lives getting the impression that this association is mostly influenced by the economic crisis, which agrees with previous research (Kokkevi et al., 2014).

Regarding the consequences of the economic crisis on the function of school units, it is perceived that they mainly have to do with the technological equipment renewal and building maintenance, as previous research has also indicated (Alexiou, 2012). Namely, school units have difficulties in renewing their technological equipment to catch up with the latest demands of the era and create a contemporary learning environment. In addition, the principals believe that the economic crisis seriously affected their participation in school activities, such as school trips, museum visits, theatre attendance, as students cannot afford to do so. Another effect of the economic crisis mentioned by the principals is the problematic contact with parents, which can be attributed to parents' disappointment they probably feel because of the economic crisis and the pressure they are under in order to meet their children's demands for participation in the school activities (e.g., school bag, stationery, daily brunch) and extracurricular activities, which is concurrent with previous studies (Galanaki, 2015b). Another serious effect of the economic crisis on the quality of their educational work has to do with the reduction in training opportunities (e.g., closure of teaching training centers, lack of educational and training programs at Regional Training Centers) as well as the feeling of insecurity about their job, which has already been revealed by previous studies (Mouza & Souchamvali, 2015).

In the fourth part of the questionnaire administrators were asked to refer to practices they probably implement in order to cope with the crisis effects. In particular, the actions that seem to be more common among school units focus on the reduction in student stationery and materials, the implementations of education programs offering students emotional support, the collaboration with other organizations, such as the Municipality, Church, social groceries, and the frequent contact with the Parents' Association of the school unit. Finally, when asked to mention what would help them better face the new reality regarding the daily educational process or function of schools, the administrators referred to the increase in the funding by the Municipality, the provision of free-of-charge creative activities to students, the implementation of educational programs focusing on pedagogical issues and ways of confronting problems caused by the economic crisis, the diffusion of good practices implemented by various schools and the development of electronic networks of teacher communication.

The present study is an important contribution to the previous studies exploring the effects of economic crisis in Greece (e.g., Doliopoulou, 2015; Galanaki, 2015a, 2015b; Gouvias, 2012; Kokkevi et al., 2014). The focus was on students coming from public primary schools in urban cities, as primary education is obligatory and constitutes the place where one can find students coming from all socioeconomic status with the exception of children who attend private schools. The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of economic crisis on children and school units according to principals' views.

At this point, it should be mentioned that the findings of the study are based on principals' perceived views and therefore the factor of subjectivity should be considered, especially in cases where they had not previously discussed the topic with the school teachers according to the initial instructions regarding the completion of the questionnaire. Furthermore, it should be considered that, as the participation in the completion of the questionnaire was optional and some principals were hesitant to participate in the research for fear that the information provided through the questionnaire should be associated with some type of their job assessment, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. In this way, further research is suggested to expand and verify the findings of the present study. It would be interesting for future studies to compare the information based on the Prefecture and the educational grade (e.g., a comparison of findings between the kindergarten and primary schools). Overall, the purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of economic crisis on children and school units and recommend good practices that can be implemented to help educators face difficulties.

In this way, further analysis of the results of the study in conjunction with the qualitative analysis of the principals' interviews can give the chance to better understand the effects of economic crisis on the vulnerable population at early childhood education schools, design and implement practices to prevent and improve the situation.

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