



From Emergent to Multiliteracies: A Review of Preschool Language Teaching Curricula in Greece (1989–2021)

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the modern curricula of language teaching in Greek preschool education, tracing their evolution from the landmark 1989 syllabus to the implementation of the new 2021 curriculum. The study employs a qualitative policy document analysis of official preschool language curricula issued by the Greek Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), between 1989 and 2021. The review analyzes the key pedagogical and theoretical shifts that have shaped early childhood language education over three decades. It follows the progression from a didactic, skills-based model to the introduction of child-centered, interdisciplinary methods and the concept of "emergent literacy" in 2003. The analysis then highlights the formal integration of "critical literacy" as a core theoretical approach in the 2014 revision, culminating in the adoption of a comprehensive "multiliteracies" framework in the 2021 curriculum. The findings demonstrate a clear and progressive trajectory towards a more sophisticated, theoretically-grounded framework that views literacy as a complex, socially-situated practice. This evolution underscores a commitment to developing active, critical thinkers and reflects the understanding that high-quality preschool programs are a key pillar for a child's success in school and in life. This review contributes to international discussions on early childhood literacy by showing how national curriculum reforms in Greece reflect broader global trends toward emergent literacy, critical literacy, and multiliteracies approaches. The review concerns Greek public kindergarten curricula for children aged 4–6, focusing on Greek as a first language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern developments across all societal sectors have catalyzed significant changes within the field of education. Consequently, the curricula of formal education at all levels are undergoing a process of continuous reform, updated and adapted to reflect contemporary methodologies. These curricula are fundamental, as they determine not only the content of teaching but also the broader framework of pedagogical activities (Koutsouvanou, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, the term preschool education refers specifically to Greek public kindergarten, which constitutes the first level of formal education in Greece and serves children aged 4 to 6. The review focuses on Greek as a first language (L1) within the national curriculum framework, rather than on Greek as a second or foreign language.

Within this context, comprehensive kindergarten programs have attracted growing interest from both researchers and educators. This focus stems from the widely accepted observation that the preschool years are a decisive period in a child's life. During this stage, children acquire foundational knowledge and skills through a combination of high-quality experiences and thoughtfully designed educational programs.

Modern preschool curricula place the child at the center of the learning process, taking into account the interests, needs, abilities, developmental pace, and pre-existing knowledge of each individual. This stands in contrast to traditional models, which often lack detailed methodological proposals, guidance on classroom management, or modern evaluation methods, and are typically rigid in their planning and execution. The purpose of this paper is to review the evolution of modern curricula for language teaching in Greek preschool education, tracing their development from the landmark 1989 syllabus to the implementation of the new 2021 curriculum. While countries such as Finland, Australia, and the United States have also moved toward child-centered, multiliteracies frameworks, Greece offers a unique case of how these theories are adapted in a different socio-cultural and policy context.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on policy document analysis. The corpus was selected through purposive sampling and consists of official preschool language curricula developed and approved by the Greek Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), which serves as the national scientific body responsible for curriculum design, evaluation, and educational planning. Only curricula with national validity for public kindergarten education were included. In Greece, preschool education constitutes the first level of formal education and is compulsory for children aged 4 to 6 years.

The selected curricula were analyzed chronologically using qualitative document analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify continuities and shifts in pedagogical orientation and theoretical frameworks, with particular attention to changes in literacy conceptions (e.g., skills-based approaches, emergent literacy, critical literacy, and multiliteracies). This longitudinal approach allowed for the systematic examination of how language education in Greek preschool curricula has evolved over time. The study included both officially implemented and pilot preschool language curricula, provided that they were issued or endorsed by national educational authorities. The inclusion was limited exclusively to curricula designed for public kindergarten education, ensuring a consistent focus on the preschool level. Curricula addressing other educational levels (e.g., primary education) or general language policy documents not specifically targeting kindergarten were excluded from the analysis.

The review is narrative and critical in nature, rather than systematic. It focuses on the interpretive examination of key national policy documents in order to trace major pedagogical and theoretical shifts in preschool language curricula over time. The analysis was conducted through qualitative document analysis, involving careful and systematic close reading of the curricula and thematic interpretation of their aims, pedagogical principles, and underlying conceptions of language and literacy. The study does not follow a formal systematic review protocol but adopts a theoretically informed, chronological approach to curriculum analysis.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. The Concept of the Curriculum

The curriculum is a fundamental dimension of the educational process, as it determines the content of teaching and the framework of pedagogical activities that are developed in school (Flouris, 2008). Numerous definitions for the curriculum exist, differing based on varied perspectives on what a program should include, how it should be implemented, and what it should aim to achieve. According to Stenhouse (2003), the curriculum is an effort to transmit the principles of an educational proposal in a way that is open to criticism and can transform theory into practice. Hatzigeorgiou (2004) adds that it denotes educational experiences with a pedagogical purpose, which include the selection and planning of activities. Vrettos & Kapsalis (2009) state that the curriculum contains the educational intentions and goals that are realized through the teacher's application of the contents, means, and methodology described in the program.

As a product of an organized teaching process, the curriculum performs several key functions. It reflects a specific social, cultural, and political perception tied to the broader political and social system. It also ensures the continuity of teaching and learning, serves as a vehicle for new reform ideas, and helps achieve homogeneity within the educational system by establishing a common standard of education (Vrettos & Kapsalis, 2009).

Curricula can be categorized based on the organization of their content and the theories that influence them. A primary distinction is made between "open" and "closed" programs, which depends on the degree of teacher intervention allowed. Closed programs are typically centralized and focus on the final result rather than the learning process. They are characterized as comprehensive, teacher-centered proposals that do not adopt an interdisciplinary approach and limit the teacher's autonomy. In this model, the student is often viewed as a passive recipient of instruction, which contradicts the goal of fostering free and autonomous individuals (Chrysafidis, 2004; Vrettos & Kapsalis, 2009). By contrast, open programs emphasize flexibility, interdisciplinarity, and the active role of both teachers and learners, creating space for critical thinking and creative engagement.

In contrast, open curricula are decentralized, providing general guidelines rather than detailed objectives. This gives teachers the flexibility to adapt the learning process to their specific classroom conditions, set or revise goals, and select appropriate content and methods (Hatzigeorgiou, 2004). Open programs prioritize the process of approaching knowledge over the knowledge itself, emphasizing experiential situations that arise from student interests. As a result, they are student-centered, with learning emerging from the interaction and cooperation between children and teachers. This model promotes discovery learning, project-based work, and differentiated instruction, making the learning process more flexible, creative, and enjoyable (Chrysafidis, 2004; Vrettos & Kapsalis, 2009).

A second distinction is between "traditional" and "modern" curricula. Traditional programs are often limited to a presentation of teaching units for each subject and are primarily content-driven. They typically lack methodological proposals, classroom management strategies, and modern evaluation methods. Furthermore, their content often remains unchanged for many years, failing to adapt to the evolving needs of society (Vrettos & Kapsalis, 2009).

Conversely, modern curricula holistically integrate objectives, content, teaching methods, and assessment methods, providing a framework that ensures the teacher has freedom and autonomy. Their design is based on findings from the educational sciences and aligns with modern pedagogical, didactic, and psychological principles (Kitsaras, 2004). In preschool education, this shift has been particularly significant. Kindergarten is no longer seen merely as a preparatory stage for primary school but as a critical period for cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and aesthetic development. Modern preschool curricula, therefore, are designed as open programs that place the child at the center, promoting exploratory and experiential activities to cultivate imagination, creativity, and a genuine discovery of knowledge (OECD, 2004).

3.2. The Concept of Literacy

To avoid conceptual confusion, literacy is often defined in relation to language as the means by which an individual gives meaning to their thoughts, ideas, actions, and works (Matsagoura, 2007). However, Hasan (2006) expands this view, considering that “literacy develops in a particular kind of notation, which uses language as its source,” thus moving beyond the traditional connection between language and knowledge. For Charalambopoulos (2006), the term refers not only to reading and writing but also to the ability to produce, understand, and engage with various forms of oral and written texts according to the specific communicative context.

Adopting a sociolinguistic perspective, Mitsikopoulou (2001, as cited in Kondyli, 2008) defines literacy as “the ability of an individual to function effectively in a variety of communicative situations and social circumstances using written and spoken texts, as well as non-linguistic texts.” This view aligns with Hymes’s concept of communicative competence, wherein members of a language community effectively handle the communicative means of their language. Halliday’s (2004) perspective further clarifies this, stating: “being literate means being able to make use of the most elaborate forms of language used in written speech – and the system of social values that accompany it.” This definition underscores that literacy is tied to the sophisticated use of written language, which is continually redefined by the sociocultural environment in which it occurs (Hatzisavvidis, 2007).

3.3. The Importance of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a pedagogical approach to organizing and teaching language that connects the ways in which language transmits or challenges dominant meanings within a broader social context. It involves the analysis of authentic texts, emphasizing how they function in relation to social reality, including the ideological positions they transmit and imply (Hatzisavvidis et al., 2011).

This approach can be understood by contrasting two major theoretical models. The first, which Street (1984, as cited in Street & Lefstein, 2007) calls the “autonomous or cognitive model,” treats literacy as a neutral, technical skill, detached from the social context in which it occurs. This model views the transition from spoken to written language as a complex process requiring the activation of discrete cognitive functions like metalinguistic and phonological awareness (Aidinis & Kostoulis, 2001).

In radical contrast, the “ideological” or “socio-cultural” model posits that language is a socially constructed practice that both reflects and shapes social and ideological processes (Street & Lefstein, 2007). This is the foundation of critical literacy, where individuals do not accept social contexts as given but subject them to critical analysis (Archakis & Tsakona, 2009). The theoretical underpinnings of critical literacy draw from critical theory and sociocultural theories (Kontovourki & Ioannidou, 2013). Following Freire (as cited in Gee,

2006), a critical literacy pedagogy aims to develop a critical spirit and creativity, enabling students to "re-formulate" or interpret texts and the world around them, thereby becoming active judges of social reality.

The pedagogical goals of critical literacy are to provide students with a substantial knowledge of various genres of discourse and an understanding of the methods by which knowledge is constructed within them. According to Kontovourki & Ioannidou (2013), teaching practices that realize these dimensions include:

- Engaging with texts that are meaningful to children and stem from their everyday experiences.
- Using texts from the social space.
- Reading and decoding the linguistic elements of texts and how these are linked to relations of power and authority.
- Exploring social issues alongside the acquisition of reading and writing skills.
- Analyzing the way readers are positioned within a text and make meaning based on the author's linguistic choices.

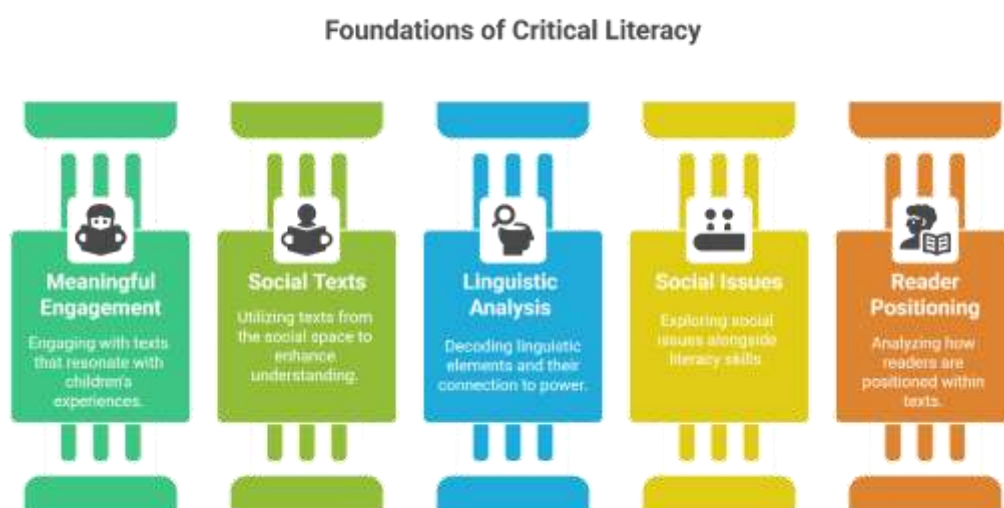


Figure 1: Foundations of Critical Literacy.

4. CHRONOLOGICAL REVIEW OF PRESCHOOL CURRICULA IN GREECE

4.1. The 1989 Syllabus

With Presidential Decree 486/1989, the Ministry of Education proposed the first modern syllabus for Preschool Education. The stated purpose of this program was the all-round and balanced development of infants across psychomotor, emotional, moral, religious, aesthetic, and intellectual domains. Special emphasis was placed on cultivating motor and innovative skills within a climate of freedom, security, and reflection.

The program was structured as a curriculum organized into general sections of the educational process that corresponded to broad objectives, which were then broken down into individual sections with specific goals and content. It contained five main areas: a) education

and development of the infant, b) psychomotor development, c) socio-emotional-moral-religious development, d) aesthetic development, and e) the intellectual and skills sector, which included pre-reading, pre-writing, and pre-mathematical stages.

Language education was integrated within the intellectual, skills, and aesthetic sectors. A key feature of this program was the use of language as a tool to achieve all objectives, making linguistic development a central goal of all educational activities. Language itself was divided into two subsections: language as a form of symbolic function and as a tool of thought. The goals were for toddlers to verbally express ideas and linguistically depict reality, while also moving beyond it to achieve further linguistic and mental development (Goti & Dinas, n.d., p. 5).

The main characteristics of language education in this syllabus were its communicative approach, child-centered orientation, and the reframing of the kindergarten teacher's role to that of an assistant and animator. The approach to the written word was characterized by didactics, emphasizing the necessity of using written language within a literate environment rather than treating its acquisition as a natural process like oral language. Teaching focused on the technical elements of the reading and writing system, largely ignoring the toddler's potential for emergent literacy. A core principle of the teaching process was the linguistic activation of the toddler, with the teacher acting as an interlocutor and coordinator. Errors were treated as a normal part of learning to be corrected pedagogically, and the evaluation of speech aimed at improving communicative ability (Goti & Dinas, n.d., p. 6).

4.2. The 2003 Interdisciplinary Unified Curriculum Framework (DEPPS)

Significant educational reforms at the turn of the century, including the formal recognition of kindergarten as a compulsory year of attendance, led to the creation of the Interdisciplinary Unified Curriculum Framework (DEPPS), designed in 2001 and implemented in 2003. The DEPPS promoted a substantial shift in the character of preschool education by adopting the principle of interdisciplinarity. Education became more child-centered, with proposed teaching methods including project-based work, investigations, experiential and collaborative learning, and the integration of ICT (Gliou-Christodoulou 2005).

The DEPPS was based on the view that knowledge and language are built gradually through supportive communicative relationships. It reframed children's errors not as failures but as natural expressions of their effort to acquire knowledge, making them a starting point for the design of the learning process (DEPPS, 2003). Content from different cognitive areas—Language, Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Creativity and Expression, and Informatics—was not to be taught as distinct subjects but as a unified framework for planning meaningful activities for children.

A pivotal change in the DEPPS was its abandonment of the "reading readiness" model in favor of teaching strategies that familiarized children with the written word through the practices of "emergent literacy" (Kondyli & Stellakis, 2010, p. 85). Similar shifts toward emergent literacy were observed internationally at the same period, such as in the US Head Start program and in Scandinavian preschool reforms, reflecting a broader global move away from readiness models toward more integrated literacy experiences. This concept, while running through the curriculum, was not deeply analyzed, representing a shortcoming of the framework. Despite some ambiguities, the DEPPS is characterized as an open program that provides general guidelines while giving teachers the freedom to act and adapt. It also emphasizes the importance of cooperation between parents and teachers, urging educators to

consider children's pre-existing knowledge and family environments when planning activities (DEPPS, 2003).

4.3. The 2011 Pilot Curriculum ("New School")

In 2011, as part of the "New School" initiative to upgrade the educational system, the Ministry of Education introduced a new pilot curriculum for kindergarten. This program aimed to respond to the challenges of the 21st century by placing the student at the center of the learning process, fostering a creative, open, and innovative educational climate. The curriculum was designed to be flexible, interdisciplinary, experiential, and pedagogically differentiated, cultivating collaborative and self-directed learning (PSN, 2011).

Structurally, the 2011 curriculum differed from the DEPPS by expanding the learning areas to eight: Personal and social development, Natural Sciences, ICT, Environment and Education for sustainable development, Language, Physical Education, Arts, and Mathematics. For language specifically, the curriculum was structured around four key skills: oral comprehension, oral production, written comprehension, and written production. The pedagogical approach emphasized treating texts as products of communication, as linguistic and semantic structures, and as carriers of ideological and sociocultural meanings (PSN, 2011, p. 204).

The teacher's role was that of a coordinator who designs language activities to create an appropriate communication framework, helping children acquire communication skills and linguistic-critical literacy. The program encouraged the use of authentic materials from various sources and aimed for student-produced texts to be addressed to real recipients, fostering a meaningful and practical approach to language learning (PSN, 2011, p. 205).

4.4.4.4 The 2014 Revised Curriculum

The 2014 Revised Curriculum marked a significant step in formally grounding preschool language education in specific theoretical approaches. This revision explicitly based its language program on the concepts of Emergent Literacy and Critical Literacy, moving them from implicit ideas to the core of the pedagogical framework. This explicit adoption of critical literacy parallels developments in countries such as Australia and Canada, where critical literacy had already become a central framework in early childhood and primary education. In the Greek context, this shift signaled a deliberate effort to move beyond descriptive guidelines and to embed literacy within a coherent pedagogical vision that emphasized both the developmental and the social dimensions of language learning.

Emergent Literacy was defined as the attitudes, behaviors, and skills that children develop as they naturally come into contact with oral and written texts in their environment. The curriculum directed the teacher to help children understand and systematize their prior linguistic experiences, highlighting the everyday ways in which language is discovered.

Simultaneously, the program was founded on the principles of Critical Literacy, which posits that language is a multi-layered cultural product shaped by ideological, social, and technological processes. The curriculum guided teachers to investigate not only the observable conditions of communication (e.g., speakers, occasion) but also the underlying social parameters (e.g., social roles, gender) that shape a text's meaning. This perspective was intended to create the conditions for children to become active and responsible interpreters of information, capable of understanding the full range of meanings a message can convey

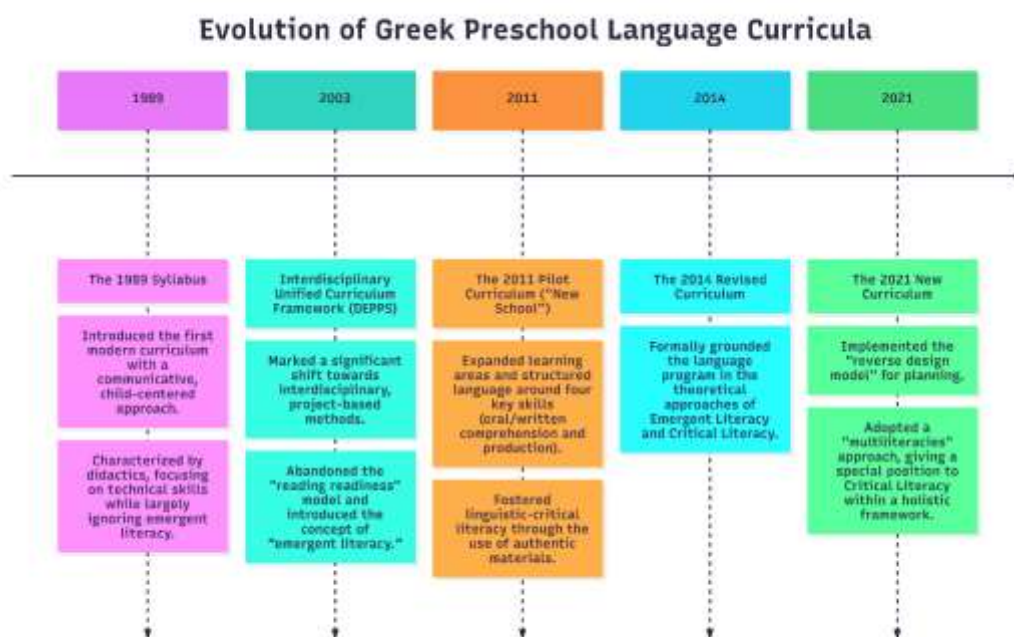
(Revised Curriculum, 2014, pp. 99-101). At the same time, the framework acknowledged that such ambitious aims could only be gradually realized, requiring consistent pedagogical support and opportunities for teachers to adapt their practices. This highlighted both the promise of the 2014 reform and the persistent challenge of translating innovative theoretical perspectives into the everyday routines of preschool classrooms.

4.5. The 2021 New Curriculum

The most recent curriculum, introduced at the end of 2021, represents a further evolution in pedagogical design and theoretical application. A key feature of this program is its basis in the "reverse design model," which involves first identifying the desired competencies, then determining the evidence for assessing progress, and finally planning the learning activities (A.P.S, 2022, pp. 6-7).

The content is organized into four holistic Thematic Areas, with 21st-century skills integrated throughout. In this new structure, communication is a central pillar, addressed in the Thematic Area "Child and Communication." This curriculum adopts the approach of "multiliteracies," which emphasizes the use of multimodal texts and various semiotic systems for producing meaning in authentic contexts. This orientation reflects the influential work of the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), whose multiliteracies framework has been widely adopted in international early childhood and literacy education debates. Within this broader framework, Critical Literacy holds a special position. It is leveraged to treat every text as a cultural product containing ideological and social characteristics, encouraging children to understand and discuss messages in light of their full cultural and social context (A.P.S., 2022, pp. 8-9). This approach aims to prepare children to decode the world around them and face the challenges of modern social reality.

This timeline provides a visual overview of the key milestones in the evolution of Greek preschool language teaching curricula from 1989 to 2021. It highlights the progressive shift from early didactic, skills-focused models towards more modern, holistic pedagogical frameworks. The chart illustrates the introduction and integration of key theoretical concepts over time, including the move to interdisciplinary methods, the adoption of "emergent literacy," and the eventual grounding of the curriculum in "critical literacy" and "multiliteracies."



5. DISCUSSION

The chronological review of Greek preschool curricula demonstrates a significant and laudable trajectory towards a more theoretically robust and pedagogically ambitious framework. The shift from a didactic, skills-based model in 1989 to one grounded in multiliteracies and critical literacy by 2021 is not merely a procedural update; it reflects a fundamental change in the perception of early childhood education and the capabilities of young learners. This evolution, however, brings with it a new set of implications, challenges, and opportunities.

A primary implication of the newer curricula, particularly the 2014 and 2021 versions, is the changing role of the educator. The teacher is no longer positioned as a simple transmitter of knowledge but as a facilitator of inquiry and a co-creator of meaning alongside the children. Implementing a curriculum based on critical literacy requires educators to possess a sophisticated understanding of how texts position readers, convey ideologies, and relate to power structures. This demands a high level of professional development and continuous training to equip teachers with the skills to guide complex discussions and select appropriate, authentic materials that can be critically examined in a preschool setting.

The main challenge, therefore, lies in the practical implementation of these advanced concepts. There is a potential risk of a gap between the ambitious aims of the official curriculum and the realities of the classroom. A recurring theme across the successive reforms is the tension between ambitious curricular goals and the everyday realities of preschool classrooms. While policy documents in 2003, 2014, and 2021 consistently introduced innovative literacy frameworks—emergent, critical, and multiliteracies—the extent to which these were fully realized in practice has remained uneven. This is not only a Greek phenomenon: international experiences, such as the integration of critical literacy in Australia or multiliteracies in Canada, also reveal similar struggles with teacher preparation, resource allocation, and institutional support. The Greek case therefore sheds light on a global dilemma: progressive curricular visions often exceed the practical capacities of educational systems, making implementation the critical test of reform. The success of the 2021 framework is heavily contingent on providing teachers with adequate support, high-quality resources, and a professional culture that encourages experimentation and reflection. Without this systemic support, the principles of multiliteracies and critical literacy may be applied superficially, failing to achieve their transformative potential.

Another dimension that emerges from this review is the role of teachers as mediators of curricular change. Each reform—whether it introduced emergent literacy, critical literacy, or multiliteracies—placed new expectations on educators to adopt innovative practices. Yet, the success of these reforms has always depended on the extent to which teachers were supported through training, mentoring, and access to appropriate resources. International evidence also suggests that curricular innovation often falters when professional development is fragmented or optional. The Greek experience therefore underscores the broader lesson that sustainable literacy reform requires long-term investment in teacher capacity, not only visionary curriculum design.

Nonetheless, the significance of this curricular evolution cannot be overstated. By aligning with international trends that prioritize critical thinking and social-emotional development, the Greek preschool system is taking a proactive step in preparing children for the complexities of the 21st century. The emphasis on understanding texts as cultural and social

products fosters the development of active, informed, and engaged citizens from the earliest years of education.

Future research should now focus on the real-world impact of the 2021 curriculum. Empirical studies are needed to explore how these principles are being translated into classroom practices, to assess the effectiveness of teacher training programs, and, most importantly, to measure the long-term effects on children's linguistic, cognitive, and social development. Such research will be crucial for the continued refinement of a preschool education system that is clearly committed to innovation and excellence.

6. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Greek preschool language curricula reveals a clear and progressive evolution in how literacy is conceptualized in early childhood education. Key shifts, such as the introduction of emergent literacy in 2003 and the formal integration of critical literacy in 2014, laid the foundations for the multiliteracies framework institutionalized in the 2021 curriculum. Across successive reforms, literacy is increasingly framed not as a set of discrete technical skills but as a complex, socially situated, and multimodal practice embedded in cultural and ideological contexts. The most recent curriculum consolidates this perspective by treating texts as cultural products and by positioning young children as active meaning-makers capable of interpreting and producing meaning within authentic communicative environments. The Greek case illustrates how global literacy paradigms are recontextualized within national curricula, resulting in pedagogical frameworks shaped by local educational traditions, institutional conditions, and sociocultural priorities. At the same time, it underscores enduring tensions between theoretically ambitious curricular visions and their classroom enactment, highlighting the importance of sustained pedagogical support. By documenting this dynamic evolution, the present review contributes to international discussions in language and literacy studies and reinforces the view of curricula as living texts, continuously revised as understandings of literacy, childhood, and communication continue to evolve.

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