Exploring Early Years Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices About Shared Reading: A Mixed Methods Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of the present research was twofold: (a) to explore preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices concerning the role of shared book reading in promoting preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills and (b) to investigate which elaborative behaviours and activities early years teachers consider important, in order to enrich shared reading and create a warm and supportive shared-reading climate. An explanatory sequential mixed methods research design was employed. It involved a quantitative phase which used questionnaires as a research tool and a qualitative phase which consisted of ten semi-structured interviews with preschool and kindergarten teachers. There were several important themes that emerged from this research in terms of shared-reading contexts: participants seemed to belong to the performance-oriented, high-demand and non-interrupting readers, expressed a positive stance towards language development skills, a rather sceptical attitude towards discussion about book conventions and print conventions as well as their emphasis on inferential/decontextualised language.

Key-words: Abstract-thinking skills, early childhood education, early years teachers’ beliefs, emergent literacy skills, reading styles, shared book reading

1. Introduction

Young children’s language development through storybook reading has long been a subject of interest for many researchers. Studies regarding shared reading reveal that emergent literacy skills, comprising print concepts, phonological awareness as well as oral communication are fundamental to early reading ability (Stadler & McEvoy, 2003). Besides, in many early childhood classrooms, shared reading is a common routine practice, which can be defined as the discussions and interactions occurring when a teacher and a group of children look at and read a book together. Shared reading benefits the production of novel words or expressive knowledge and it can improve the understanding of novel words or receptive knowledge (Walsh & Blewitt, 2006).

The present research aspires to explore preschool teachers’ beliefs and practices about shared reading in terms of three aspects: (a) preschoolers’ emergent literacy and oral
language development, (b) abstract-thinking skills and (c) elaborative behaviours teachers often use to create a warm and supportive shared-reading climate. As the review of the related literature suggests, previous research has mostly focused either on the reading approaches preschool teachers adopt in order to teach children within the reading context, or on the way they choose to organise and deliver the shared-reading session by commenting and questioning about the book. Exploring early years teachers’ beliefs and practices about what may constitute a high level of shared-reading environment seems to be rather underestimated. Given the paucity of related research, examining preschool teachers’ beliefs about shared reading emerges as an issue of major importance.

In order to tighten the central strand of critical literature, the present paper will address the following two focal research questions:

1. How do early years teachers view shared book reading in terms of:
   (a) emergent literacy and oral language development?
   (b) children’s abstract thinking?
   (c) elaborative behaviours that promote interactivity?

2. Do background factors, i.e. age, formal education, early childhood specialisation and teaching experience, influence early years teachers’ beliefs and practices about shared book reading?

2. Literature Review

Literacy development is a complex process that begins prior to the advent of formal reading instruction, and the skills acquired “as precursors to reading and writing” are often referred to as emergent literacy (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010: 241). Hence, emergent literacy refers to the reading and writing knowledge and behaviour of children “who are not yet conventionally literate” (Justice & Kaderavek, 2002: 8). It comprises two main categories of skills: (a) language comprehensions skills and (b) print/decoding skills, i.e. phonological sensitivity, letter identification and letter-sound correspondence (Dobbs-Oates et al., 2011). Read-aloud experiences, such as shared reading, are particularly influential to young children’s development of emergent literacy skills, since they are a highly socialised activity providing “an interactive context within which children learn and apply verbal and conceptual skills” (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010: 242).

Although shared reading may seem simple and easy as a process, its invaluable contribution to the enhancement of emergent literacy skills and oral language development in the early years has been often highlighted in the related international literature (Dickinson et al., 1992). It seems that a great range of skills are practised during
shared reading: simple precursor skills such as book conventions, i.e. front and back or top and bottom, as well as a second strand of more complex skills related to decoding print and sound units, i.e. associations between sound and alphabet letters or separating spoken words into constituent sounds (Huebner & Payne, 2010).

In order to enhance study on the field of shared reading, researchers attempted to distinguish between contextualised and decontextualised talk. Hindman et al. (2008: 333) denote that “contextualised language refers to concrete ideas or objects that are clearly depicted” in a storybook, whereas decontextualised language “reflects concepts not depicted in the book, such as predictions about a story”. In the Greek scientific community, Michalopoulou (2001) attempted to study the methodological strategies applied by preschool teachers during shared book reading. Highlighting the dynamic interaction between teachers and children, the study distinguished two types of teacher-child communication: the linear, weak-interface position, in which the teacher occupies the dominant role of the knowledge holder, reading without interruption, and the strong-interface position, during which teacher instigates children through open-ended questions and conversation.

By exploring early years teachers’ beliefs and practices about shared reading, this study aspires to reveal the significance of questions’ hierarchical structure, classified in the international literature into groups according to their cognitive complexity: certain types of questions seem to correspond to lower-order thinking, such as remembering facts, understanding and applying content, whereas others activate higher-order thinking skills, such as analysing evidence, synthesising and evaluating ideas (Vainas, 1988). The paramount importance of choosing the right sort of questioning strategies for preschoolers’ cognitive development has been repeatedly emphasised in a growing number of studies (Bowyer-Crane & Snowling, 2005; van Kleeck et al., 2006; Ford & Milosky, 2008). The majority of the researchers tend to focus predominantly on the question forms used during shared reading, i.e. open or closed questions, topic-initiated or topic-continuing questions (Zucker et al., 2010). Besides, building upon Haden et al. (1996, cited in Kang et al., 2009) as well as Pellegrini et al.’s research works (1985), Reese & Cox (1999) assessed the relative benefits of three styles of teacher’s book reading: (a) the describer-dialogic, low-demand and interrupting, focused on describing pictures during the reading, (b) the comprehender, high-demand and interrupting, focused on story meaning and inference making and (c) the performance-oriented, high-demand and non-interrupting, who introduced the book and discussed story meaning on completion. They accordingly identified three important types of utterances during shared book reading: (a)
what-questions, which are of lower demand, (b) reason explanations and (c) affective commentary, which are both statements of higher demand, promoting children’s abstract-thinking skills. Although one of the common tasks of teachers during shared reading is to enhance children understanding through effective questioning, little is known on what teachers really think about questioning practices and skills (Çakmak, 2009).

Within the shared-reading context teachers may choose to use specific behaviours, in order to encourage children to compare, evaluate, hypothesise and reason. These “cognitively challenging processes” form the basis for a more profound reading comprehension, since they require thinking beyond what is perceptually present in the text and the illustrations (Pentimonti et al., 2012). A completely different viewpoint is, though, expressed by Wilen (2001: 28), who argues that “in the short run, lower-level questions are probably more important, because they help the teacher diagnose students’ preparedness to move to higher-level understandings”. Interesting interrelations among text types, teachers’ questions and child responses during shared reading, as well as strong associations between teachers’ questioning behaviours and children’s vocabulary development, were also found by Zucker et al. (2010).

In the Greek scientific community, Tafa (2001) also studied preschool teachers’ questioning styles, focusing on the multifaceted cognitive impact they seem to have on preschoolers, as well as on the way early childhood educators choose to organise shared reading. Findings reveal that they rarely make high-demand questions. Besides, Stellakis (2011), investigating Greek kindergarten teachers’ beliefs and practices in early literacy, concluded that kindergarten teachers are not aware of their critical role regarding the construction of literacy through their teaching strategies and mediations. They mostly prefer to adopt traditional assumptions of literacy, confirming in this way their lack of knowledge and their unwillingness to embed innovatory and pioneering literacy practices in kindergarten’s everyday activities.

Given that kindergarten teachers are embedded in a certain educational and socio-cultural context, their perceptions are influenced by many factors, including their own experiences as learners and teachers, the school structure, the community needs and values, the children’s backgrounds and the general external societal attitudes towards early childhood education (Lin et al., 2003). Wilcox-Herzog (2004) attempted to explore how background factors, such as differing levels of specialised training and/or experience, influence teachers’ beliefs about the most proper way of interacting with young children; her study indicates that teachers who have higher levels of education are more likely to engage in enriched verbal encounters with the children. On the other hand, experience
was mostly related to less than positive interface with preschoolers. Quite similarly and within shared-reading context, Gerde & Powell’s research (2009: 214) points out that teachers with more years of formal education tend to use more “book-focused utterances”, defining and discussing new words, asking questions, responding to children’s spontaneous comments, and expanding the text with additional information related to the book.

The review of the related literature reveals that literacy-related activities, such as shared reading, are prioritised relatively high among teachers and children preferences (Bracken & Fischel, 2006), whereas salient elaborative behaviours are often used by preschool teachers to create interactive reading experiences within shared-reading contexts (Pentimonti et al., 2012). Early childhood teachers have been traditionally encouraged to focus mainly on classroom’s emotional climate and management issues, whereas shared reading and similar supportive literacy activities have been considered of secondary importance (Dickinson et al., 2002). A considerable amount of more recent studies (Aram et al., 2013), though, highlight the significance of shared reading primarily as a socio-emotional development activity, focusing on mental terms, mental causality and references to the child’s life, and secondly as a cognitive development activity.

3. Research Methodology

The present mixed methods study aimed to explore preschool teachers’ beliefs and practices about shared reading in early childhood settings in terms of three dependent variables: (a) emergent literacy and oral language development, (b) abstract-thinking skills and (c) elaborative behaviours adopted to promote interactivity within shared-reading contexts. It employed a two-phase, explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The quantitative phase of the study made use of the Systematic Assessment of Book Reading, a tool elaborated by Pentimonti et al. (2012).

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of five multiple-choice questions, aiming to collect important information in terms of teachers’ age, gender, educational qualifications, years of teaching experience as well as frequency of shared reading in classroom. The second, third and fourth part of the questionnaire involved twenty-five items in total, aspiring to gain insight into the three major issues under research. Finally, in an attempt to support greater interrogation and a more in-depth understanding of teachers’ beliefs and practices around shared reading as well as invigorate the results emerged from the first quantitative phase of the study, ten semi-structured interviews
were conducted and transcribed. The thematic analysis of the text data revealed significant constructive results in terms of the research questions.

4. Descriptive Statistics

Participants in this phase of the research were 258 preschool and kindergarten teachers and only two of them were male. The mean age of teachers was 35.38 years (SD=9.086), whereas half of the participants (50.4%, n=127) were 35 years old or younger, nearly half of them (49.6%, n=125) were older than 35 years old, whereas there were also six (6) missing values. The minimum age was 19 and the maximum 56 years old. Participants’ age is illustrated in Chart 1.

In terms of participants’ educational background, 9.3% (n=24) held Master’s degrees, 45.9% of teachers (n=118) held University degrees, 21.4% (n=55) held Institute of Vocational Training degrees, 16.7% (n=43) held Technological Educational Institute degrees, 6.6% (n=17) held Pedagogical Academy’s degrees, whereas there were also nine missing values. Chart 2 depicts participants’ educational qualifications.

Most of the participants (37.6%, n=97) had a teaching experience ranging from zero to five years, 26.7% (n=69) of the participants had eleven to twenty years of experience, 21.7% (n=56) had a working experience of six to ten years, 12.8% (n=33) had a teaching
experience of twenty to thirty years, whereas there were 3 participants who had a working experience of more than 31 years. Data in terms of participants’ working experience are illustrated below in Pie Chart 3.

In terms of reading frequency, 51.6% teachers (n=133) read storybooks every school day, 30.6% (n=79) three times a week, 10.5% (n=27) twice a week, 5% (n=13) once a week, whereas 2.3% (n=6) of the teachers gave an alternative answer, stating that the reading frequency depends on the lesson plan and subject, as well as on children’s interest. Chart 4 below illustrates preschool and kindergarten teachers’ frequency of reading.

![Pie Chart 3](image)

![Bar Chart 4](image)
In terms of the development of emergent literacy skills and oral language development within shared-reading contexts, measurements of the central tendencies signified that participants of the first phase of the study seemed either to “agree” or “strongly agree” with five of the statements. A considerable number of them, however, appeared to be rather sceptical (“neither agree nor agree”) about some of the items, i.e. about providing the definition of words included in the story (17.5%, n=45), about discussing book conventions (17.5%, n=45), print conventions (20.2%, n=52), letter sounds/phonemes (30.1%, n=77), combinations of letters/graphemes (30%, n=77), as well as about pausing reading, in order to ask children questions (23.3%, n=60). As regards the development of abstract-thinking skills during shared-reading activities, the quantitative data analysis revealed a central tendency of the participants to “strongly agree” with most of the items that concern the enhancement of preschoolers’ abstract-thinking skills within shared-reading contexts, scoring percentages above 50% in each item (range 53.9%–59.1%) with the exception of only two items, where they appear to simply “agree”: asking children to make comparisons (36.1%, n=92) and provide explanations after shared reading (38.6%, n=98).

Concerning elaborative behaviours after shared-reading sessions, they seemed to be particularly important for preschool and kindergarten teachers. Hence, quantitative analysis indicated that after a shared-reading activity participants “strongly agree” with giving children the chance to illustrate the story (63.6%, n=164), to hold the book and turn pages (76.4%, n=197), to dramatise the story (66.5%, n=171), to make text-life connections (51.4%, n=132), offering a positive feedback (76.7%, n=197) and showing respect to children’s answers (94.9%, n=244). Besides, their agreement did not seem to be so strong and explicit in terms of encouraging children to label their drawings (45.1%, n=116) or organizing the classroom’s library and elaborating on children’s crafts and ideas (45.3%, n=117).

5. Non-parametric Inferential Statistics:

The Kruskal-Wallis one way Analysis of Variance

The first set of Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric ANOVA aimed to explore any relationships of preschool teachers’ groups of age (≤ 35 years and > 35 years) with each of the questionnaire’s dependent variables. Thus, the null hypothesis that there is not any statistically significant relationship between teachers’ age and (a) oral language development, (b) abstract-thinking skills and (c) elaborative behaviours was accepted. Quantitative data analysis noticeably revealed that there is a statistical significant relationship neither between teachers’ age and oral language development score ($x^2 df=1 =2.291, p=0.101$) nor between teachers’ age and elaborative behaviours score ($x^2 df=1$
The null hypothesis was retained for these two scores; however, abstract-thinking skills’ score proved to have a statistical significant level of relationship with teachers’ age ($\chi^2 df=1 =6.472, p=0.011$).

The second set of Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric ANOVA aimed to explore any relationships between preschool teachers’ educational qualifications and each of the three variables of the questionnaire, accepting the null hypothesis that there is not any statistically significant difference between them. Inferential analysis showed that there is a statistical significant relationship in terms of teachers’ educational level with the oral language development score ($\chi^2 df=4 =18.518, p=0.001$) and the abstract-thinking skills score ($\chi^2 df=4 =14.719, p=0.005$), rejecting, thus, the null hypothesis. The third set of Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric ANOVA examined the relationship between the years of teaching experience with each of the questionnaire’s dependent variables, accepting the null hypothesis that there is not any significant difference between them. The analysis of the quantitative data revealed that working experience does not seem to influence preschool teachers’ beliefs about shared reading in terms of all three dependent variables. Thus, the null hypothesis was retained.

By completing the quantitative analysis, processing the data and examining the results, significant issues, central messages and key questions ensued. In order to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the topics under research and based upon evidence drawn from the quantitative data analysis, an interview guide was formulated consisting of five questions and allowing to ten participants to express their reflections and insights. All ten interviewees were female and Table 1 below illustrates their characteristics, i.e. age, educational background, teaching experience.

First of all, four major themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis as possible reasons for not discussing phonemes and graphemes during shared reading: (1) “shared-reading central purpose”, (2) the “non appropriateness” of shared-reading activities for promoting emergent literacy skills, (3) “children’s age” and (4) “teachers’ insufficient in-service training/specialisation”. Hence, as regards the first category, half of the interviewees expressed the belief that the fundamental aim of shared reading is “to insert children into the world of literature and the pleasure of reading” (P_5), “to transmit messages and key meanings” (P_1) and help children “express their inner thoughts about the story” (P_3), implying that the discussion of phonemes and graphemes during shared reading is not equally important.
Regarding the “non-appropriateness of shared-reading activities for promoting emergent literacy skills”, eight interviewees pointed out that other activities seem more practical and more convenient (P_5), simpler and less complicated (P_1, P_2) and much more creative (P_4) for engaging preschoolers with phonemes or graphemes. Examples of such activities were also mentioned: worksheets (P_8), the reading of labels, signs and tags (P_6), flashcards (P_10) and the reading of children’s names (P_3). Besides, three interviewees (P_7, P_9, P_10) believe that “children’s age” is a critical factor which influences teachers’ decision to discuss phonemes and graphemes during shared reading. Preschool teachers who hold degrees of Technological Educational Institutes work in nursery schools and they teach children of two, three or four years old; thus, they appeared to be more interested in promoting other skills such as oral language, memory or fine motor skills (P_7) rather than teaching letters. Two participants (P_8, P_9) explicitly expressed the belief that a considerable number of preschool and kindergarten teachers are inadequately equipped and educated and their in-service training seems to be rather inefficient (P_9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (P_1)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (P_2)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3 (P_3)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>4 (P_4)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>University Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 (P_5)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>6 (P_6)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 (P_7)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Degree of Technological Educational Institute (TEI)</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 (P_8)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Degree of Technological Educational Institute (TEI)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (P_9)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>10 (P_10)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Degree of Vocational Training Institute (IEK)</td>
<td>8</td>
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Table 1
Qualitative data analysis revealed five key themes as possible reasons for not enhancing book and print conventions during shared reading: (1) “complexity”, (2) “triviality”, (3) “different reading style”, (4) “teachers’ lack of knowledge/specialisation” and (5) “association with more hands-on and practical activities”. Regarding the first category of “complexity”, three participants (P_1, P_6, P_10) feel that the teaching of book and print conventions may be a difficult and rather complicated issue for early years teachers. Besides, in terms of the second category of “triviality”, there were three interviewees (P_1, P_9, P_10) who thought that a considerable number of teachers may consider book and print conceptions rather unimportant or even boring for preschoolers (P_4). Two participants (P_1, P_2) expressed the thought that it may also depend on the “different reading styles”, stating that the way we read is practically subjective. “Teachers’ lack of knowledge/specialisation” emerged again as an important theme, mentioned by three participants (P_5, P_7, P_9); since preschool and kindergarten teachers are not aware of the importance of teaching book and print conventions, “they cannot estimate their pedagogical value and their advantages for children’s early literacy” (P_9). The association of book and print conventions with more hands-on and practical activities was the last category found (P_2, P_3); book and print conventions were, thus, characterised as “more or less technical qualities of shared reading” (P_4).

Based upon interviewees’ answers, qualitative data analysis yielded two central themes as possible reasons for hesitating to interrupt reading, in order to ask children questions about the story. Hence, seven participants mentioned the “fear of losing the control of the class”; they believe that a considerable number of preschool and kindergarten teachers feel rather insecure to interrupt reading, especially when children seem concentrated and absorbed. The second major theme, stated by half of the interviewees, was the “fear of spoiling the atmosphere/magic of reading”. Besides, one interviewee mentioned “teacher’s laziness and inadequate preparation” as a possible reason, referring to those who “just read a story without working on that” (P_10), whereas, another one mentioned the importance of attending seminars and specialisation courses in shared-reading activities, in order to be informed about ways of turning interruptions into creative and beneficial conversations with preschoolers.

Three major themes concerning possible reasons for laying particular emphasis on the development of abstract-thinking skills within shared-reading contexts emerged from the qualitative data analysis of preschool teachers’ interviews: (1) “simplicity”, (2) “manifold development of skills” and (3) “creativity”. Regarding the third theme, two additional sub-
themes derived from the thematic content analysis: “imagination” and “emotional expression”. First, in terms of “simplicity”, three participants mentioned that shared reading is probably considered by preschool and kindergarten teachers as an easy and practical means of enhancing preschoolers’ abstract-thinking skills (P_1, P_5, P_6). However, they also acknowledge that there is a wide range of other activities for developing these skills, such as maths, science or ICT activities (P_6). Besides, two interviewees expressed the belief that preschool teachers possibly recognise that by using shared reading in order to foster children’s abstract-thinking skills, they can combine “a manifold development of skills” within one activity and involving the whole class at the same time (P_2, P_3). The issue of “creativity” and the sub-categories of “imagination” and “emotional expression” were signified by four participants; changing the story’s plot by creating “a new ending for the story” (P_4), expressing “your own thoughts or emotions” for the story (P_8, P_9) and seeing “beyond what is stated in the text” (P_10) are considered as fundamental elements of abstract-thinking process and as cornerstones of creative and imaginative thinking.

Qualitative data analysis of the fifth interview question yielded one main emergent theme mentioned by all interviewees: the “usefulness” of shared reading, considered as a wholly-accepted truth (P_1), a kind of “passepartout” you can use to introduce any subject and teach any issue you want (P_5). Shared reading revealed as an invaluable activity with “a wide range of pedagogical practices and extensions” (P_8), whereas two participants developed this argument further stating that in recent years the pedagogical worth of shared-reading activities “is also taught in the departments of preschool education” (P_9) and highlighted “in university courses, modules and sessions” (P_10).

6. Evaluation

Findings emerged from the mixed methods design employed in the present study highlight that shared reading is considered by preschool and kindergarten teachers as a dynamic process, which can provide children with valuable opportunities to acquire and develop emergent literacy and oral skills. In the quantitative phase of the study, participants expressed their “strong agreement” with five of the eleven items mainly related to the first category of emergent literacy skills, i.e. the language comprehension skills. Hence, identifying visual cues related to the story, such as pictures and repetitive words, encouraging children to retell the story or express their thoughts and their feelings about the story as well as asking children to recall information from the story, appeared to be the most significant components of shared reading in the early years. Findings replicate
retrospective studies that highlighted the importance of read-aloud activities in developing preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills and familiarising them with informal literacy experiences (Manolitsis et al., 2011).

Attempting to compare the results of the study with previous researches, it seems that shared-reading experience gains an additional value, since it is associated with children’s later reading achievement, as well as with the learning and application of verbal and conceptual skills (Walsh & Blewitt, 2006; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). Furthermore, participants agreed with providing the definition of words included in the story, reflecting previous work in the field in terms of embedded instruction, i.e. of teaching word meanings to kindergarten children during storybook readings (Coyne et al., 2009). However, a range of skills practised during shared reading, such as book conventions (front and back or top and bottom of the book, author’s name, book’s title, illustrator’s name), print conventions, (top to down and left to right text reading), as well as certain skills related to decoding print and sound units (phonemes and graphemes), did not appear to be among the main concerns of the preschool and kindergarten teachers, who took part in the study.

The qualitative data analysis revealed key themes that seem to provide answers to these particular issues. They also corroborate earlier research on this issue already elaborated in the literature review section (Ehri & Roberts, 2006), according to which teachers’ attention during shared reading seems to be mostly focused on meanings, on the pleasure of reading and on the expression of children’s inner thoughts and emotions.

On the whole, participants’ answers to the eleven items about emergent literacy and oral language development clearly implied a dynamic interaction between early years teachers and preschoolers; adopting a strong-interface position (Michalopoulou, 2001), participants believe that motivating children to take part in a dialogic reading environment, by actively listening and by encouraging a discussion about the story (Wasik & Bond, 2001), forms a significant part of every shared-reading context. The results of the present research in terms of the development of preschoolers’ abstract-thinking skills establish that questions play a pivotal and substantial role in shared-reading activities. Therefore, participants appeared to “strongly agree” with four (4) out of six (6) items on abstract-thinking skills' development, i.e. with asking children to express judgements, evaluations or inferences about the story, to form hypotheses about what could possibly happen in the story, to make predictions regarding the continuation or the ending of the story, as well as to ask children about the emotions of the story’s main characters. Furthermore, they seem to also “agree” with the importance of asking children to make comparisons or
identify contrasts, as well as with asking children to provide explanations of certain feelings, attitudes and behaviours outlined in the story. This very much implies that preschool and kindergarten teachers lay emphasis on inferential or decontextualised language (Pentimonti et al., 2012), a term often encountered in the literature, indicating those cognitively challenging processes, which form the basis for a deeper and more thorough reading comprehension.

The abovementioned findings signify that early years teachers’ beliefs about the development of abstract-thinking skills within shared-reading contexts mirror what has already been mentioned in the literature review chapter of the present paper: thinking beyond what is actually present in the text and the pictures seems to enhance children’s reading comprehension abilities and critical thinking skills (Snow, 1991). Findings emerged from the qualitative data analysis of the second phase seem to develop and expand these arguments further; hence, the development of abstract-thinking skills was seen as a powerful means of fostering children’s creative and imaginative thinking and as a channel of children’s emotional expression. Besides, according to the results of the present study, activating higher-order thinking skills (Vainas, 1988) by posing high-demand questions is considered to be a major priority of the preschool and kindergarten teachers who participated in the research. Although the data of this research are non-parametric, not allowing generalisable assumptions about the broader population of preschool and kindergarten teachers, it seems that participants’ beliefs refute previous research on this issue: as already stated in the review of the related literature, Tafa (2001) and Stellakis (2011), investigating Greek kindergarten teachers’ beliefs in terms of book reading concluded that they avoid making high-demand questions and they seem to prefer rather traditional assumptions of literacy, which apparently does not coincide with the present study’s results.

Besides, in terms of early years teachers’ reading styles previously mentioned in the literature review, most of the study’s participants seem to belong to the performance-oriented, high-demand and non-interrupting teachers, who introduce the book and discuss story meaning on completion (Reese & Cox, 1999). On the other hand and although they consider evaluative judgements, reasoning and explanations, hypotheses and predictions as issues of major importance within shared-reading contexts, they seem to be rather reluctant to interrupt reading in order to ask questions about the story. Content analysis of the qualitative data of the study yielded two central themes as possible reasons for this issue; hence, preschool and kindergarten teachers seem to be worried either about losing
the control of the class, especially when children are concentrated and absorbed in the story, or about spoiling the atmosphere or the magic of shared reading.

The review of the related literature revealed that a wide array of elaborative behaviours is often used by preschool teachers to create interactive reading experiences within shared-reading contexts (Pentimonti et al., 2012), which is also clearly suggested in the present research. Hence, preschool and kindergarten teachers expressed their “strong agreement” with nearly all the items on elaborative behaviours within shared-reading contexts. However, two of the eight items on elaborative behaviours and activities, i.e. encouraging children to label their drawings and elaborating on children’s crafts, in order to organise and enrich the classroom’s library, did not appear to be equally popular among preschool and kindergarten educators. Besides, sustaining preschoolers’ interest through positive feedback and showing respect towards children’s answers were proved to be exceptionally significant pedagogical practices; such findings reflect previous work in the field, according to which similar elaborative behaviours are considered important contributors to classroom’s emotional climate and major socio-emotional activities, able to foster a supportive shared-reading session climate (Dickinson et al., 2002; Aram et al., 2013; Pentimonti et al., 2012).

Age appeared to be a strong determinant in terms of teachers’ beliefs about the development of abstract-thinking skills within shared-reading contexts. Quite similarly and also reflecting previous studies (Wilcox-Herzog, 2004; Gerde & Powell, 2009), educational level seemed to be a factor of major importance, since it apparently influences what teachers believe about the emergent literacy and oral language development skills as well as preschoolers’ abstract-thinking skills development within shared reading. Hence, teachers with higher levels of formal education appeared to have a more positive stance towards developing the abovementioned skills through enriched verbal encounters during shared reading. Besides, teachers’ educational level appeared to be strongly interrelated to the reading frequency, implying that early years teachers with higher level of education tend to effectuate more frequent book readings in preschool classrooms.

On the other hand, teaching experience did not appear to be such a determinative factor within shared-reading contexts; neither in terms of oral language development, nor in terms of abstract-thinking skills and elaborative behaviours adopted in preschool classrooms, teaching experience seemed to influence preschool teachers’ beliefs. Such findings reflect to a great extent Wilcox-Herzog’s (2004) previous study, according to which experience was not related to a positive interface with preschoolers. The qualitative phase aimed to elucidate this issue: thus, qualitative analysis and interpretation implied
that shared reading is an invaluable activity and its importance, usefulness and pedagogical worth is wholly accepted by preschool and kindergarten teachers regardless of the years of their teaching experience.

What revealed as an element of major importance is the reading frequency in preschool classrooms, since it is strongly correlated with preschool and kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about enhancing oral language development and abstract-thinking skills as well as with the variety of elaborative activities they perform, in order to provide a warm and supportive shared-reading atmosphere. The fact that 51.6% (n=133) of the teachers who participated in the study read storybooks every school day signifies the emphasis they lay on shared reading, further implying that they recognise the manifold advantages of shared-reading activities for the oral language development of preschoolers as well as for the cultivation of their abstract-thinking skills. Along the same line, results of the semi-structured interviews revealed another issue of significance: hence, two interviewees acknowledged parents’ role in providing children with their first informal and formal literacy experiences. Based on their teaching experiences, teachers denote that a considerable number of preschoolers who enter kindergarten are already acquainted with shared-reading activities and they have been exposed to a literacy-rich home environment.

7. Conclusion

Acknowledging that teachers’ beliefs represent a rich reservoir of general knowledge, which affects their planning and their classroom behaviour, the present study aspired to explore early years teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding the role of shared reading in terms of three major issues: (a) preschoolers’ emergent literacy skills and oral language development, (b) preschoolers’ abstract-thinking abilities and (c) teachers’ elaborative behaviours within shared-reading contexts. By implementing a mixed methods approach, the present research managed to include and incorporate the qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interviews into the results of the quantitative phase.

Early childhood educators who participated in the study have explicitly expressed their favourable attitudes towards improvement of oral language and abstract-thinking skills through shared-reading activities, whereas they also seemed to consider elaborative behaviours within shared-reading contexts as particularly constructive and beneficial for preschoolers. This finding was also consistent with existing research thoroughly mentioned in the literature review section. On the other hand, the development of print/decoding skills (phonological sensitivity, phonemic awareness, letter identification, letter-sound correspondence, print conventions and book conventions) through shared
reading was identified as an area towards which teachers appeared rather hesitant and dubious.

The results of this mixed methods approach offered useful information to the research and practice of early childhood education about the way preschool and kindergarten teachers view the role of shared reading in terms of the three aspects under research. However, there are certain limitations, which warrant mention and can be seen as fruitful avenues for future research. First of all, the research tools used in both the quantitative and the qualitative phase of the mixed methods approach aspired to provide a more nuanced examination of the issues under research. However, teachers’ beliefs expressed through a questionnaire or a semi-structured interview might be different from what really happens in practice, or they may be influenced by social desirability. Hence, it is possible that future more comprehensive and more extensive representation of observations in terms of classroom interactions across the day could reveal more detailed aspects of shared-reading strategies adopted by preschool teachers, helping to support the findings of the present study.

Secondly, participants in the quantitative phase of the study represented a rather convenient sample; by design and since the sample was not normally distributed, the results of the study cannot be considered generalisable for the broader population, and thus, non-parametric statistics were used for analysis. Therefore, the external validity of the findings, i.e. the degree to which they can be applied to other contexts and settings, is quite limited. However, the results provided by the analysis and presentation of the qualitative phase provided interesting and important elements around the research issues. Future research on larger samples of early years educators will be important to confirm whether the beliefs, patterns and strategies revealed by the present mixed methods approach hold true.

Reference List


