

## Pre-school education close to natural environment: Studying Parameters on Parental Choice and Dedication

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### ABSTRACT

Preschool is a period of rapid development of skills and learning, the infant learns through family, school and especially through exploring the natural environment. The child, playing in an outdoor environment close to natural environment, naturally develops his talents, his creativity but also many motor skills, which otherwise, indoor learning environments would not give so many opportunities. Outdoor learning environments in natural environments contribute significantly to the learning of children, especially young children. This paper explains the importance of designing learning environments close to natural environment, something that parents have realized and now consciously choose such environments for their children's learning and development. This article examines the parameters involved, in detail which of the 7ps' elements of Educational Marketing most influence the choice of parents with children in East Thessaloniki to make decisions about their children attending Private Kindergartens with large yards, away from the urban environment and in areas close to natural environment and natural areas. The results of the research show that these parents are of a high educational level, graduates of a University or Technological Institute, with a Master's degree or Doctorate. Also, when parents are satisfied with the quality of the school space, the existence of pedagogical materials and toys for the employment of children, the existence of an outdoor large yard and outdoor activities with infrastructure and facilities away from the urban environment and close to natural environment then they choose this Pre-school education for their child's attendance, they recommend it voluntarily to acquaintances and friends and would choose their child to continue attending to a next level of education such as Primary School if there was one.

### 1. Introduction

The pre-school years of a child are the basis of healthy personality development, but also of the socio-emotional and cognitive abilities of the person (Katz, 1999). For better development of children, we should invest in learning programs that are supported in both social and physical environments. Pre-school is a period of rapid development of skills and learning, the infant learns through family, school and especially through the exploration of the natural environment (W.H.O. 2007). A school institution with very good facilities and infrastructure, close to natural environment has been proven to provide security to teachers, make them feel valuable, greatly improve their work performance and better influence the

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academic performance of children (Uline & Moran 2008 ). Otherwise, the poor facilities of an institution and the distance from natural environment, affect the motivation of teachers and indirectly the education of children (Shalleh, Kamaruzzaman & Mahyuddin 2013). An educational institution to stand out in the highly competitive private sector is important to invest in competent, popular and well-trained teaching staff, in the opinion of parents with children attending private pre-school educations (Kalouli, Tsekouropoulos, Chatzigeorgiou 2019). Children can be more influenced than any other age group by the environment in which they study. Childhood is a period of time associated with continuous learning, energy and play and is influenced by the environmental factors under which all these processes take place (Loebach 2004). Outdoors are the best learning environments for children. These areas offer opportunities not found indoors. Thus, outdoor spaces designed for children are very important because they contribute to learning. External learning environments are mainly of two categories: On the one hand are the activities of the Curriculum managed by teachers such as experiments, observations, explorations and on the other hand are the informal activities carried out by children according to their own preferences receiving unconscious information and gaining experience of the environment through their own observation (Loebach 2004, Acar 2014). Outdoor activities with sand, water, mud, or collecting fallen leaves, creating habitats for birds, ants, etc. provide many opportunities for exploration, observation and help to develop ideas for ecological balance, but also how to live in harmony with our planet (Güler 2009).

Parents have now realized the importance of motor development in early childhood, that's why more and more people are looking for natural places to relax for their children. When parents on their first visit to a Private Kindergarten are satisfied either with the existence of adequate pedagogical games, or with the pleasant decoration of the space, then it is easier for their children to enroll there, but they also recommend the pre-school education to acquaintances and friends. that is, the more parents realize the marketing efforts of their children's kindergarten, the more favorable is their image and therefore their devotion and behavior in the specific Kindergarten (Kalouli, Tsekouropoulos 2020). In this endeavor, many parents seek Kindergartens and pre-school centers as close to natural environment as possible, away from the urban environment with large yards and outdoor toys to allow children to interact with natural elements (Acar 2014). From the literature review it was found that the factors that are easily observable, such as the facilities, infrastructure attract the attention of parents more and more (Scopelliti & Mussati 2013). Parental satisfaction seems to be more correlated with practical and functional factors than with pedagogical ones according to research (Chaudry et al 2011, Sandstrom&Chaudry 2012). However, we can't overlook the role of human resources in attracting more and more client-parents (Katsonis et al 2018). The internet and e-marketing by creating appropriate websites, serve the viability and recognition of both these institutions and various businesses that are close to natural environment and must be promoted in order to become widely known (Andreopoulou et al 2013). Marketing is a process that can promote the values and goals of an institution, actively communicating with parents and promoting their needs and requirements (Ho 2010). According to Kotler & Armstrong (2012) educational marketing is defined through the elements of 7ps '. These elements are: Product mix, Price mix, Place mix, Promotion mix, People mix, Physical Evidence mix and Process mix. The location of a school is one of the most important factors in a marketing strategy. According to Barnes (1993) there are three major dimensions of the space category in educational marketing and it is the geographical location, the environment

and the accessibility to it that influence the decision of parents to enroll their children in the respective school institution. Environmental sustainability, social responsibility and green marketing are considered important practices in the sustainability of our planet and their promotion is of paramount importance (Tsekouropoulos, Andreopoulou, Vatis 2015) for both businesses and schools. In this article we will study the parameters involved in that decision, which of 7ps' elements, can influence the choice of parents to enroll their children in Private Kindergartens in the suburbs of East Thessaloniki close to natural environment with large yards and outdoor activities. We will further observe through our data collection the educational level and the devotion of the parents to their choice, despite the distance from their home.

## 2. Methodology

The main objectives of this research were explored through the formulation of research hypotheses. We studied two hypotheses. The first hypothesis investigates the educational level of parents who enroll their children in Private Kindergartens in the suburbs of Eastern Thessaloniki away from the urban environment of the city. At the other hand the second hypothesis studies the 7ps 'elements of educational marketing influence parents to be committed to this choice.

To explore the views, the method chosen is the quantitative approach with 180 interviewed parents of Private Kindergartens in the suburbs of Eastern Thessaloniki, using a suitably designed questionnaire of 40 closed-ended questions. The questions are Dichotomous and Likert 5 rating points from high dissatisfaction to high satisfaction, for the collection of primary data. The questionnaires were distributed to parents whose children attend private kindergartens in the suburbs of Eastern Thessaloniki by the method of sampling with predetermined percentages (Quota sampling), so that there is a representative sample of parents of all private kindergartens that had a large yard and natural environment. The questions are divided into four sections, the first section consists of questions to collect the demographics of the respondents, the second section contains questions related to the elements of the 7ps Educational Marketing strategy, the third section concerns questions about parental devotion and behavior in Pre-school education where their child attends and the fourth section contains questions about the image and reputation of a kindergarten. The questionnaires were completed by 83.9% by women, mothers of children attending Private Kindergartens close to the natural environment of Eastern Thessaloniki, while 16.1% by men. 51.7% of the total sample had 2 children, and 71.7% were parents between 36 and 45 years old. Regarding the professional employment of the sample, 38.9% are Private Employees, 31.1% Civil Servants, 21.7% Freelancers. Finally, in terms of the educational level, 50% are University graduates, 31.7% have a Master's degree, while only 3.3% hold a PhD. The data analysis was performed with descriptive and inductive statistics data, making statistical analysis S.P.S.S (Superior Performance Software System) of the data collected to draw conclusions that contribute to the documented performance of data.

## 3. Results

Regarding the first question, we examine the role of the educational level of the parents with the variable of the Product mix of Educational marketing. The presentation of the results is done through Table 1 of the Correlations and they present the correlations with a significance level  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 1:** Parents' educational level and Marketing Tactics.

Evaluate the infrastructure and facilities of a kindergarten located close to the countryside, away from the urban environment.				
Parents educational level	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Sig.
High School	10	4,2807	0,61975	0,038
Institute of Vocational Education and Training	17	3,8235	0,95101	
University-Technological Educational Institute	90	4,3000	0,86700	
Postgraduate	57	4,6000	0,69921	
Ph.D.	6	4,8333	0,40825	
Total	180	4,2833	0,79997	

\* Mean (1 = High dissatisfaction, 5 = High satisfaction)

Looking at Table 1, we distinguish the Averages between the Demographic variable "Parents' educational level" and the quantitative variable of the section Marketing Tactics: Educational mix (Product mix), "Evaluate the infrastructure and facilities of a kindergarten located close to the countryside, away from the urban environment". Between these two variables the significance coefficient is  $p = 0.038 < 0.05$ . Specifically, parents who hold a PhD show high satisfaction with the infrastructure and facilities of their kindergarten located close to natural environment and away from the urban environment of the city with an average of 4.8333. Immediately after that, are the parents who have a Master's degree (Avg = 4,6000). While not so satisfied, show the parents who have completed an Institute of Vocational Education and Training with Avg = 3.8235. So according to the results of the table the high evaluations for a Pre-school education located in the countryside come mainly from parents of a high level of education.

Regarding the second research question, we investigate the correlations of the 7ps' variables of educational Marketing related to Product mix and Place mix. These elements of Educational Marketing are the infrastructure of the Kindergarten of the parents' choice, the existence of outdoor areas with outdoor games such as a playground, etc., the location of the Pre-school education (away from urban environment, parking spaces, contact with natural environment) which and we correlate with the qualitative variables of Parental Loyalty in the specific Kindergarten. The method used is One Way Anova. Below are the correlations of the variables with significance level  $P < 0.05$  as obtained from the statistical analysis S.P.S.S.

**Table 2:** Correlations of Product mix and Place mix with the variable "If this kindergarten also had an Primary School, would I choose my child to continue there?"

<b>If this kindergarten also had a Primary School, would I choose my child to continue there? YES/NO</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean*</b>	<b>Std.Deviation</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Evaluate the quality of the school space (natural light, ventilation, etc.)*	180	YES:4,3958 NO: 3,6667	0,7774 1,1464	20,580	0,000
Evaluate the existence of sufficient pedagogical materials and toys for the employment of children.*	180	YES:4,4097 NO:3,7778	0,7136 0,9292	19,867	0,000
Evaluate outdoor areas such as a playground, activity areas.*	180	YES:4,3611 NO:3,8056	0,7628 1,0642	12,878	0,000
Evaluate the infrastructure of the specific Kindergarten (infrastructure, facilities, etc.)*	180	YES:4,3542 NO:3,8056	0,7335 1,0090	13,705	0,000
Evaluate the location of the Kindergarten (away from urban environment, places of employment in natural environment, etc.)*	180	YES:4,3889 NO:3,7500	0,82029 1,2956	13,502	0,000
Evaluate cleanliness and hygiene of spaces*	180	YES:4,6875 NO:4,1111	0,6084 0,9791	19,691	0,000

\*(Evaluate from 1-5, Mean: 1=High Dissatisfaction, 5=High Satisfaction)

According to Table 2, when parents are highly satisfied with the quality of the school space, the existence of pedagogical materials for the employment of children, the outdoor spaces in natural environment, the infrastructure of the pre-school education, the location of the institution away from urban environment but also the cleanliness of the premises then they tend to choose to continue their children's education at a next level of education such as Primary School. Here we observe the correlation that exists between the continuation of children's education in the next level of education with the existence of outdoor spaces for the employment and exploration of children close to natural environment.

**Table 3:** Correlations of the Promotion mix and Place mix with the variable "Was this particular Kindergarten my first choice?"

<b>Was this particular Kindergarten my first choice? YES/NO</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean*</b>	<b>Std.Deviation</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Evaluate the existence of sufficient pedagogical materials and toys for the employment of children.*	180	YES:4,3957 NO:3,9024	0,7383 0,8889	12,832	0,000
Evaluate outdoor areas such as a playground, activity areas.*	180	YES:4,3309 NO:3,9756	0,86300 0,7901	5,570	0,019
Evaluate cleanliness and hygiene of spaces*	180	YES:4,6691 NO:4,2439	0,6526 0,8882	11,277	0,001

\*(Evaluate from 1-5, Mean: 1=High Dissatisfaction, 5=High Satisfaction)

According to Table 3 above, a Pre-school education tends to be one of the first choice of parents when they are satisfied, on their first visit there, with the existence of sufficient pedagogical toys for their employment, when they are close to natural environment with sufficient outdoor space for exploration and employment of children, and finally by the cleanliness and hygiene of these areas.

**Table 4:** Correlations of the Promotion mix and Place mix with the variable "Do I voluntarily recommend this kindergarten to acquaintances and friends?"

<b>Do I voluntarily recommend this kindergarten to acquaintances and friends? YES/NO</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean*</b>	<b>Std.Deviation</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Evaluate the quality of the school space (natural light, ventilation, etc.)*	180	YES:4,3675 NO:2,8571	0,7650 1,2924	44,315	0,000
Evaluate the existence of sufficient pedagogical materials and toys for the employment of children.*	180	YES:4,3795 NO:3,1429	0,7096 0,9492	37,073	0,000
Evaluate outdoor areas such as a playground, activity areas.*	180	YES:4,3133 NO:3,5000	0,8374 0,7595	12,336	0,001
Evaluate the infrastructure of the specific Pre-school education (infrastructure, facilities, etc.)*	180	YES:4,3253 NO:3,2857	0,7565 0,9944	23,150	0,000

Evaluate the location of the Pre-school education (away from urban environment, places of employment in natural environment, etc.)*	180	YES:4,3614 NO:3,0714	0,8396 1,4917	26,332	0,000
Evaluate cleanliness and hygiene of spaces*	180	YES:4,6747 NO:3,3571	0,6151 0,9287	54,170	0,000

\*(Evaluate from 1-5, Mean: 1=High Dissatisfaction, 5=High Satisfaction)

Observing the above Table 4, the parents who are highly satisfied with the quality of the school space, the existence of pedagogical materials for the employment of the children, from outdoor areas close to natural environment, from the infrastructure of the kindergarten, the location of the institution away from the urban environment but also the cleanliness of the premises then they tend to voluntarily recommend the kindergarten to acquaintances and friends by attracting new registrations in it.

#### 4. Conclusions/Suggestions

From all the above it can be concluded that there is a relationship between the natural learning environment and the readiness of children at school. The importance of the natural environment in preschool children can no longer be ignored. Parents who choose to send their young children to school in a natural environment-friendly environment have identified an improvement in their children's readiness. The image of a school institution depends on many factors, one of them is the location of the Pre-school education, the contact with natural environment in the daily life of a pre-school education program approaches more and more parents since this can now be displayed on the internet (Kalouli, Tsekouropoulos, Chatzigeorgiou 2019). Children have an environmental awareness and their learning is enriched with information that they learn effortlessly by engaging with natural environment as the activities are based more on their observation and practical engagement (Acar 2014). These parents are mainly highly educated and are committed to their decision according to the research data. People who grow up close to natural environment will develop into adults who will be aware of it, will care for it and will respect it, a fact that is very beneficial for the future generation of our country. Strong environmental values need to be integrated into the wider culture of both people and businesses, let alone schools through the design of green strategies (Tsekouropoulos 2016). The findings of this study are based on a limited sample of parents whose children attend Private Kindergartens in Eastern Thessaloniki and their generalization to other areas both in Greece and abroad, would provide significant support in the effort to expand the results. It is also necessary to conduct a quality study in the future to provide further insight and answers to the results of this study explaining the motivations of parents who send their children to private pre-school educations close to natural environment.

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