

**University of Thessaly**  
**School of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Laboratory of Theoretical and Applied Pedagogy**  
**Department of Preschool Education**  
**Research Project *TOCSIN***  
**“Teacher support Confronting Social INequalities”**

There search programme “Teacher support Confronting Social INequalities” (**TOCSIN, 3708**)<sup>1</sup> studies the consequences of the continuously growing financial crisis on vulnerable population groups of preschool and early school age. It is realized under the coordination of the University of Thessaly, and the scientific responsibility of Pr. Domna Kakana.

More specifically, the project studies the consequences of the ever growing financial crisis on the vulnerable children population, as portrayed in public schools of Preschool Education and first classes of Primary School. More generally it concentrates on the educational procedure and educational function of school units, it high-lights the actions and good practices adopted by educators, while the research team created a free access electronic platform, where the educational community can detect examples of educational activities and school actions, information of out-of-school activities, training events, support agencies, legislation, and additional material for the tackling of the consequences of the financial crisis in Greece.

The quantitative research took place from February 2016 until late March of the same year. It involved 316 school units, of which 163 Kindergartens (51,6%) and 153 Primary Schools (48,4%), mostly in Thessaloniki (90 units, 28,5%), Magnesia (44 units, 13,9%), and Attica (165 units, 52,2%), as well as 17 units (5,4%) from other areas, given that the research came to the attention of educators throughout the country, and some school directors decided to fill and submit the research questionnaire. The student population of the schools participating in the research is 20.758 people, 11.687 from Attica, 6.435 from Thessaloniki, 2.055 from Magnesia, and 581 from other areas, of which 5.688 toddlers and preschoolers, and 15.070 students of the three first Primary Schools classes.

As TOCSIN’s primary goal, we pursued a narrative surveying of the consequences of the continuously growing financial crisis on vulnerable populations of preschool and early school-age, who attend public Kindergartens and Primary Schools. All data were collected from the Directors and Supervisors of school units.

Educators were asked whether particular consequences of the **economic crisis on children** as identified bibliographically were also spotted in their school units. It appears that 68% of educators declare that the main problem surfacing or exacerbated since 2010 is the reduced participation of students in school activities, such as excursions. Other problems, such as nutrition and clothing/footwear, seem to have

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influenced significantly the students of half the school units of the research sample. 31,6 % argued that they have noticed consequences in school program attendance, while 45% highlighted difficulties on the students' response on educational activities of the school unit. It is noted that a percentage of educators circa 8-10% answered in almost every question that they have not spotted whether any consequence appears on the children or not.

Regarding the consequences on the school units, they seem to be mostly connected to the renewal of equipment and monitoring tools. Furthermore, maintenance of school areas, purchasing of stationeries and functioning of all-day school are registered as the main problems faced by the school units. What is pleasant is that, according to the research results, heating and students' transportation are so far adequately dealt with. Qualitative data analysis of the relevant open-type question point to an agreement with the quantitative evidence, given that most references verify and underline the immense shortage on logistics equipment (72 references), as well as the feebleness of maintenance (67 references). It is worth noting that the three geographical areas differ significantly on personnel shortages as a consequence of the economic crisis on school units, with the region of Attica suffering the most from such a shortage. In addition, differences were identified between Kindergartens and Elementary schools, with the former stating greater shortage than the latter, which nevertheless face more difficulties with the provision of stationeries, as portrayed statistically.

Furthermore, educators in Elementary schools have noticed that the **motivation for learning and the learning outcomes** of their students are more influenced by the economic crisis, compared to the children in Kindergartens, as is their participation in the educational process (the concentration of the children and their ability to meet the educational demands). In the same time, reduction in funding and restriction of all-day school classrooms, as well as the problems in parallel support are referred as having influence on the students' performance, while there seem to be important differentiations among the three geographical areas of the research, with educators in Attica stating that the students' performance in their area being influenced more than the others. The research brought to light problems with the family, which have been attributed to the problematic communication with the parents, mainly to their disappointment the latter feel because of the economic crisis, but also from the pressure the parents feel due to their feebleness to respond to the demands of their children's everyday needs, among which is their contribution to life in school (school kit, daily snack), as well as to life out of school. The parents' inability of having a presence at school is stated as the least possible cause.

Regarding the contributing **factors** to these consequences, according to the educators' estimations, the main influencing factors to the quality of the education service are the reduction of training opportunities, since the competent institutions have ceased to operate, as well as the feeling of employment uncertainty on behalf of the teachers. It is worth noting that only few educators refer to the increase of the students' population (or the shift to its composition).

When it comes to the mobilization rate of educators in order to confront the difficulties faced by the children and challenging the school unit and their educational work, according to the answers given, it seems that in general the educators are quite active. More specifically, they have reduced the stationery and school kit items necessary, they implement projects for the emotional empowerment of the children, they cooperate with other actors, such as the Municipality, the Church, social grocery stores, and others, while the communication with the Parents' Association is more frequent. On the other hand, projects aiming at the support of low performance students are not often implemented, as well as the study for the better treatment of the consequences of the economic crisis.

Teachers believe their work could be facilitated by more funding from the Municipalities and free of charge creative activities. Furthermore, they would be interested to attend trainings related to the management of problems caused by the crisis, and also to share good practices with colleagues. In general, it is quite encouraging that at least 1/3 of the school units of our sample state that they mobilize trying to identify tools to confront the issue, while almost 1/3 seem to be starting to mobilize, and the rest 1/3 is probably not quite active.

The qualitative imprint of the economic crisis, according to the evaluation of the 2/3 of the educators participating in our research, showed that mostly affected are **the participation of children in school activities and other educational and recreational activities**. Almost half of the educators mentioned nutrition and clothing/footwear as problems the student populations faces. As regard school program attendance, most educators (2/3) mentioned that it is not an issue.

Apart from the quantitative imprint of the crisis' consequences, the school strategies and proposals, the program also included qualitative research, which aimed at the detection of signification of the crisis' consequences in the field of education and the in-depth understanding of selected strategies and proposals of secondary education schools. 34 headmasters and 16 kindergarten chiefs participated in the research, all from the areas of Athens, Volos, and Thessaloniki. These schools are located in downtown areas, east and west in each Prefecture, which were significant issues to be concerned about, and in many cases large numbers of migrant and Roma children were attending. Both headmasters and chief recognized the consequences of the crisis on the children and their families, on the relation between the school and the family, on the function of the school, as well as on educators themselves.

Elementary schools and kindergartens participating in the research proved that the **educational institution can undertake initiatives** relevant to its solidarity role, in order to cover basic needs of children and their families, cover the need in school kit items and out-of-school visits, and also additional extra needs, for which some families reach out to the school, regardless of their relevance to their children's education, such as employment and health issues. To respond to their solidarity function headmasters and chiefs in many cases look into the familial frame of the children and try to establish a relationship of trust with the family, despite the difficulties arising in many cases, due to tensions in the relationship between the

school and the family, triggered by problems afflicting the parents. Moreover, they organize and accept cooperation with municipality agencies, NGOs, individuals, the Church, etc., in order to provide material help and services relevant to the support of the family and the children. A good number of schools participating in the research were sensitized against the consequences of the crisis, planning and implementing an internal social school policy (e.g. parallel educational activities and free-of-charge evening activities for the children and the parents, functioning a “social tutorial courses”), and an external social policy, through the organization of linking up activities and offering of the school to the local and broader community (e.g. gathering of medicine for the social pharmacy and of books offered to correctional facilities, initiatives for the attendance of “traffic lights” children to school).

In order to tackle the consequences of the financial crisis, according to staff members of the school units participating in the research, the State is needed to assist mostly in three levels: (i) at the level of applying a social policy aimed to support the family in material and psychological difficulties, (ii) at the level of decision making and routing practices that upgrade the quality of the educational procedure (e.g. creation of institutions and hiring specialized scientific staff in schools which facilitate the pedagogical work and the needs of the student population), and (iii) at the level of applying a decentralized educational policy aiming at the arrangement of consolidated educational issues (e.g. school unit autonomy, modification of analytical schedules at local level).

#### Basic conclusions of the qualitative research:

- 1) All schools participating in the research undertook action at the crisis framework, differentiated as per the goal, the width, and regularization. Some schools systematically oppose the consequences of the crisis on education, considering the latter a systemic phenomenon, in the context of which the school may have a solidarity and countervailing part.
- 2) Schools have broadened the social role and enhanced their solidarity function during the crisis. Many schools went as far as undertaking educational initiatives with countervailing character, as well as implementing local/European educational projects.
- 3) Synergies and collaboration with other actors have been strengthened in the context of the crisis. Many schools either initiated the creation of synergies, or benefited from opportunities offered aiming at the melioration of living conditions of children and their families, as well as at the educational and psychological support.
- 4) The most important aspects influencing the active role of schools in confronting the crisis seem to be: the lay out and organization of activities, where the participation of school authorities is crucial (systematic against fragmentary efforts, in collaboration with other actors and individuals against isolated efforts, effective coordination of human resources, sensitization-activation of the community), the systematic support of authorities (the State, local actors, headmaster), and the sense of obligation of active citizens to participate in the confrontation of the crisis.

TOCSIN project aimed at, apart from exploring the situation in the schools during the crisis through questionnaires and interviews, the creation of an on-line

platform for the support of educators. For the creation of this platform we derived data from the quantitative and mainly the qualitative research, regarding the ways with which schools could develop activities within the educational framework, as it is formed due to the economic and social crisis.

Nevertheless, the content derived from either the data analysis and the answers give to the relevant question included in the questionnaire, as well as in the interviews, or the needs of educators for the support acknowledged as fulfilling the prospect of confronting the consequences of the crisis.

Using these elements we created an easy-to-use electronic platform, which will give answers to educators' questions, and will also aim at the creation of community of practice consisting of educators who discuss and worry for the consequences of the crisis, as well as for the activities they themselves can implement.

The platform is designed to give answers to the two most frequent questions coming from educators: "what can I do?" and "how can I do it?". The selected existing categories on the platform respond to the worded needs of educators and include:

- Useful information (legislation, supportive actors etc.);
- Ideas (educational activities and supporting equipment, out-of-school activities);
- Suggestions (initiatives and activities of schools), more as a fuse for discussion and thought than as recipes of success and best practices.

The platform is forecasted to provide the possibility to educators to discuss reflectively in an effort of networking and action. Our goal is not to manage and see to solving problems through ready-to-use solutions, but to mobilize educators for collective interventions.

Thus, taking into account that the consequences of the economic and social crisis cannot be considered as given and self-evident, educators are accredited the right to act and resist, in order to interact dynamically with the situation and the institution or organizations, in an effort to influence and contribute to the shaping of any development. In such a framework the social aspects of the crisis and the way in which they interact with pedagogical practices are necessarily taken into consideration.

The platform is already in its pilot use in the address [tocsin.uth.gr](http://tocsin.uth.gr). It will be enriched with new suggestions and ideas coming from educators. Therefore it is a flexible open-type instrument, which will be adapted to the needs of its users. The Hellenic League for Human Rights ([www. Hlhr.gr](http://www.Hlhr.gr)) participated in the dissemination of the project's outcomes from the perspective of Children's Rights. The Social Science Research Institute also participated, offering an example of dealing with the crisis in the school environment, through a series of activities and institutional safety valves.

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More information on the project: <http://tocsin.uth.gr/el/node/5>