EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF EMOTIONAL, RELATIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES - AN EDUCATIONAL PROPOSAL[i]

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Abstract:
There is a growing interest in the Greek and foreign literature and research in the early identification of behavioral and emotional difficulties in preschool children, in order to structure early intervention programmes for their benefit. It is well-studied that preschool children who display behavioral and emotional difficulties have a high likelihood of maintaining and exacerbating these difficulties and developing them into non-functional behaviors. The aim of the present study is to evaluate the research question of the differentiation of these behaviors, in the existence of a secure bond and closeness with caregivers. Furthermore, the aim of this research is to evaluate the usefulness of everyday and easy-to-use tools (such as tracing and narration) in the educational protocol of preschool education, in the Greek Kindergarten curriculum, through a specific and clearly structured activity. Finally, in the context of early intervention, this study aims to investigate the contribution of these activities to the assessment of at-risk behaviors, as well as adaptive and emotional difficulties in students.

Keywords: behavioral difficulties, tracing, attachment, caregiver, educational proposal

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Περίληψη:
Υπάρχει ένα αναπτυσσόμενο ενδιαφέρον στην ελληνική και ξένη βιβλιογραφία και έρευνα, ως προς τον πρόωρο εντοπισμό συμπεριφορικών και συναισθηματικών δυσκολίων στα παιδιά προσχολικής ηλικίας, προκειμένου να μπορέσουν να δομηθούν προγράμματα πρώιμης παρέμβασης προς όφελός τους. Είναι πολύ καλά μελετημένο, ότι τα παιδιά προσχολικής ηλικίας τα οποία εμφανίζουν συμπεριφορικές και συναισθηματικές δυσκολίες έχουν μεγάλες πιθανότητες να διατηρήσουν αλλά και να οξύνουν τις δυσκολίες αυτές καθώς και να τις εξελίξουν σε μη λειτουργικές συμπεριφορές. Σκοπός της παρούσας εργασίας ήταν η αξιολόγηση αναφορικά με το ερευνητικό ερώτημα που αφορά στη διαφοροποίηση των συμπεριφορών αυτών σε συνάρτηση με την ύπαρξη μιας ασφαλούς σχέσης και εγγύτητας με τα πρόσωπα φροντίδας. Επιπλέον στόχος της έρευνας αυτής, είναι να αξιολογηθεί η χρησιμότητα καθημερινών και εύχρηστων εργαλείων στο εκπαιδευτικό πρωτόκολλο της προσχολικής αγωγής (το ιχνογράφημα και την αφήγηση) σε συνάρτηση και συνάφεια με το αναλυτικό πρόγραμμα του Νηπιαγωγείου, μέσα από μια συγκεκριμένη και σαφώς δομημένη δραστηριότητα, και να διερευνηθεί η συμβολή τους στη συλλογή σημαντικών δεδομένων για συμπεριφορές σε κίνδυνο καθώς και προσαρμοστικές και συναισθηματικού τύπου δυσκολίες στους μαθητές, στα πλαίσια της πρώιμης παρέμβασης.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: συμπεριφορικές δυσκολίες, ιχνογράφημα, δεσμός, φροντιστής, εκπαιδευτική πρόταση

1. Introduction

There is growing interest in identifying preschool children at risk for developing behavioral and social difficulties. The behaviors that typically concern the immediate environment run along a continuum from less severe (e.g., emotional outbursts, disobedience) to quite severe violations of social and moral norms as set by the social and family environment (e.g., aggression, stealing, etc.) (Mc Mahon *et al.*, 2006).

Numerous terms in the Greek and international literature have been used to group these behaviors, such as conduct disorder, behavioral problems, emotional difficulties (Hinshaw & Lee, 2003). Whichever term one chooses to use, however, it is important to be clear that we are referring to behavioral and emotional manifestations that create a difficulty in the child's functionality, manifested enough to be perceived by the wider environment (Parke & Slaby, 1983).

The challenge remains in the early identification of emerging problems and the structuring of early intervention programmes to develop children's mental resilience. In recent years, many research attempts have demonstrated the central role of children's emotional responses in their psychosocial and educational normal development. That is, how proper emotion and behavioral management can lead to a pathway of better social adjustment (La Grutta *et al.*, 2022). The use of analogue methods, such as tracing and

narration, whose usefulness has been studied extensively (Chapman, 1993; Luget, 1991; Loizou, 1996), is an important ally in this effort.

In a rapidly changing society that increases its demands drastically and creates opportunities for emotional crises in every way, early attachment bonds (Schneider *et al.*, 2001), but also important frames of reference, such as school, can act as protective factors for the adversities that children have to deal with (Chatzichristou *et al.*, 2009).

The aim of the present research is to use tracing and narration through a specific and structured activity in the context of preschool education, as an indicator for identifying possible behavioral and emotional difficulties in children attending kindergartens.

2. The Attachment Bond as A Causal Factor

It is well studied that preschool children who display strong and overt behavioral problems, such as aggression and concentration problems, are more likely to maintain these difficulties and to develop them into non-functional behaviors (Campbell & Ewing, 1990; White *et al.*, 1993). These children belong to a highly heterogeneous group in terms of the characteristics and causality of their behavior and, therefore, grouping is extremely difficult (Tremblay, 2000). Reports have been around for many years, highlighting the importance of the attachment bond and how the quality of the parent/caregiver-child bond is a causal factor in many psychological expressions of the individual. In 1945, Winicott refers to the unbreakable mother-infant relationship and focuses his work on the significant psychological influence that the newborn receives from the mother and, by extension, from its caregivers. He refers to a 'good-enough' mother, who, according to him, must be available, and adapt to the infant's needs but also be able to autotomize and make her child self-sufficient in a non-traumatic way (Winnicott, 1945).

Shortly afterwards, Bowlby (1969) proposes the analysis of secure and non-secure attachment bonding. Secure attachment, appears to be a protective factor in the formation and development of pro-social behaviors, as well as a major influence on the social adjustment of the individual throughout their life span. Individuals, according to Bowlby (1969), build on these early bonds established with their trusted and reference persons and develop the ability to make sense of their social environment, both within and outside the family. As children grow older, they always refer mentally to their early attachments, in order to make sense of the behavioral responses of others. It is this ability to make sense of and respond to the actions of others that shape a plethora of social behaviors (Bowlby, 1969).

On the contrary, research data have not yielded correspondingly strong correlations, leaving room to believe that other factors mediate between the early attachment and the behavioral response, such as, for example, gene origins or other environmental factors, which could alter the effect of this early attachment bond on the child (Fagot & Kavanagh, 1990; Koiv, 2012). The observation of children who, starting from an insecure attachment, were able to adopt positive social behavioral responses and

be functional for themselves and others have created new interest in developmental psychology research. Rutter (1989), spoke of alternative developmental pathways; that is, the path of a child who accumulates risk factors but manages to find functional outlets. According to Rutter (1985), some protective factors (e.g. significant others) are identified and are factors or mechanisms that can change or differentiate a child's response to an event that would, in any case, prompt him or her to adopt a dysfunctional behavior. In such a dynamic process, sensitive to change, any significant environmental structure in which the child grows and develops can be a protective factor for his or her mental resilience. One such place is certainly the school. School, at a first level, can play an important role in identifying children who cluster risk factors for challenging behaviors, but it can also be a cradle of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral sharing, so that these children are exposed to new healthy behavioral patterns (Esquivel, Doll, & Oades-Sese, 2011). The school, as an integral systemic link to the family and community, can coordinate actions to promote mental resilience in its students. That is, to create "*mentally resilient communities*" (Hatzichristou, Lykitsakou, Lampropoulou, & Dimitropoulou, 2010; Henderson & Milstein, 2008. Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2009).

3. Methodology

The present study was conducted with preschool children, and the data collection protocols were integrated into their daily timetables. This activity was part of a wider sex education programme that we organized and implemented together with the teachers. Physical presence in the classrooms was deemed essential in the development of the programme, ensuring participatory and close collaboration of the psychologist with the kindergarten teachers. The children attended 5 preschool classes in Kindergartens belonging to the Regional Directorate of Education of Crete, specifically coming from the prefecture of Heraklion. According to the Greek Pre-school Curriculum (2011 & 2014), the programme is part of the learning area: Personal and Social Development.

3.1 Goal
To understand the concept of personal space, safe and non-secret and to evaluate the frame of reference with significant others.
- Children recognize their personal space,
- Understand the difference between secure and non-secure secrets,
- Identify their circle of trust / referring to their significant others.

The activities always started in the plenary, and using various tools such as thinking routines, games, stories, pretending to play with dolls, awareness of the reference topic was raised. Then, depending on the needs and concerns of each group, we worked in small groups or individually, with tools such as symbolic play, tracing, narration, to make the children understand concepts such as my personal space, good and bad secrets, and circles of trust. The activities were carried out in a playful and creative way so that children could express their personal experiences and perceptions

about the theme of each activity and their concerns. Many times, the dolls pose a problem, and the children try to solve the problem by suggesting different ways of dealing with it. The programme was completed again in the plenary session, where a questionnaire with pictures or a puzzle was used to assess the level of assimilation of the new information given to the group each time.

According to the New Updated Comprehensive Greek Curriculum, which was used from the school year 2023-2024, the main objectives of the kindergarten are to ensure the conditions for the successful development of each child and the operation of the kindergarten as a learning community. Therefore, using thinking tools (such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and reflective decision making) and life tools (such as personal empowerment and social responsibility, citizenship, flexibility, adaptability and resilience), this program can be integrated:

- in the Skills Workshops in the EY ZEN cycle, aiming at Self-care, either in the Thematic Field "B.Child, Self and Society", in the subsection B1, Personal and socio-emotional development:
- B1.1 the sense of self, i. positive self-image
- B1.2 Emotional Awareness, i. perception and ii. expression of emotions
- B1.3 Interpersonal Relationships, i. interaction - communication, ii. developing and maintaining relationships

Before the beginning of the program with the children, an informational day was organized for the parents/carers of the children. In that workshop, we focused on explaining to them in detail the program that we were going to develop, listening to their questions and objections, and shaping the activities so that they would not be "uncomfortable" for anyone but would continue to be scientifically beneficial for the children, in the direction we had pedagogically set with the teachers. The parents/caregivers were informed of the presence of the psychologist in the classrooms, and we proposed and implemented a padlet (online space) for this project, in which the school director posted photographic material, as well as a description of the actions we were implementing. In addition, space was provided for posting further material (e.g. books) that parents/carers could use with their children outside school. A space was also created where parents/carers themselves could post their suggestions, with these suggestions being visible to all of us. Finally, on the same padlet there was a space for questions, concerns and queries from parents regarding the activities. In addition to this information, the projects that the children implemented were sent individually to the parents by email.

At the workshop, parents were asked to give written consent for their children's participation in the programme by means of a written declaration. They were informed that they can request their child to withdraw at any time, as long as they ask for it. The excellent cooperation of the school principal and teachers with the majority of the parents led to the fact that all the parents in the school easily consented.

Starting the action with the children, initially, the story "Rina Asterina decides to talk" by Mrs. Daskalaki Eleni was narrated. For this story, special dolls were made to

simulate the protagonists of the story so that the content would be more pleasant and understandable to the children, but also to give them the opportunity after the end of the action to work with the dolls, finding further solutions or developing their symbolic play. In Rina's story, their trusted neighbor, Mr. Starfish, harasses Rina in a way that makes her uncomfortable. Rina, who is embarrassed but cannot put into words what has happened to her, wonders why she feels as if she has done something mischievous when, in fact, she has done nothing. She wavers about whether she should talk to her mother. She finally finds the courage to reveal the secret to her mother, only to discover that this relieves all her burden and makes her feel lighter and calmer.

Based on Rina's story, we talked to the children about the good and bad secrets. We agreed that good secrets are those that make you feel positive emotions, while bad secrets make you feel negative emotions or make you not know exactly what you are feeling. And, after the kids and the psychologist grouped good and bad secrets through examples, we asked ourselves what we would do with a bad secret after we recognize it. We talked about trust circles, drew them with chalk on the floor and decided on the people each of us would put around and that we would tell all our secrets to, those we would tell some secrets and those we would tell none. The children were given a worksheet, depicting a boy, a girl or a gender-neutral drawing in the center of the circle. They were also given a choice regarding the worksheet they would like to work on. The worksheet provided for a space for trusted people next to the child and one close enough. Finally, there was a space away from the inner circle where the children and I agreed to place strangers to whom we would not tell any secrets that were weighing on us.

Together with the kindergarten teachers, we wandered around the children's seats in order to clarify and note who they chose to trace. Since many of the children chose underage peers for the circles closest to them, the children were specifically asked to think of an adult they would like to put near them. It remains striking that despite this prompt, some children were unable to identify an adult who would tell all their secrets.

During the analysis of the tracings, it was assessed whether, in the inner and, therefore, nearby circles, they chose to trace an adult member of the nuclear family.

From their tracings, we observed that children who appeared to have secure attachment ties with the family, as assessed by clinical observation, kindergarten teachers' information about their interactions with the family, parental availability, and children's words, placed one of their caregivers next to themselves, in contrast to children whose relationships with caregivers were insecure. We wondered whether this observation we made, the presence or absence in trust circles of an adult belonging to the nuclear family, could be significantly related to the child's classroom functioning and social adjustment.

Then, the children's kindergarten teachers were asked to fill in the questionnaire "Criterion of school and social competence" for each child. The results were collected and evaluated between the two groups of children (with or without a nuclear family person in their tracings).

3.2 Research Sample

The number of children who participated in the activity was 100. However, 82 protocols were considered valid, as in 18 cases, children had difficulty understanding the question. This was due to their specific developmental characteristics. The children, as recorded, were 43 girls and 39 boys.
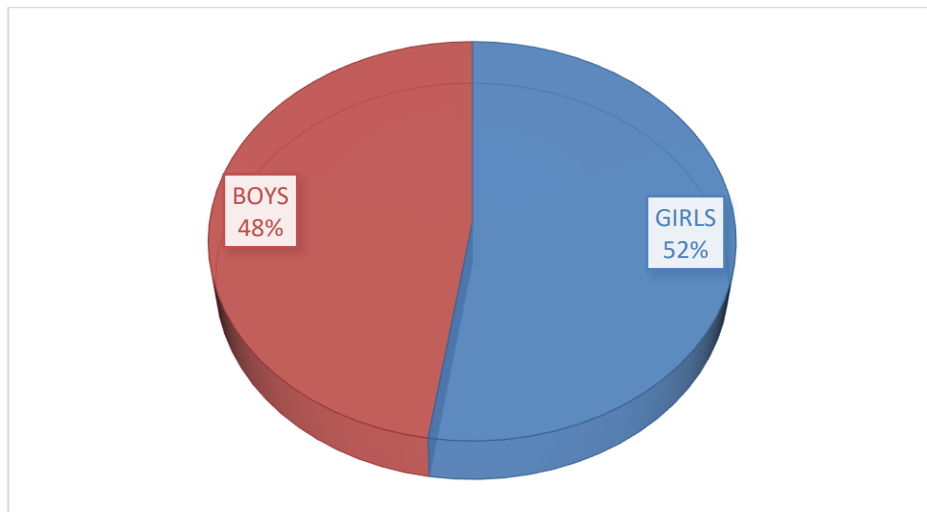

Figure 1: Sex ratio in the sample

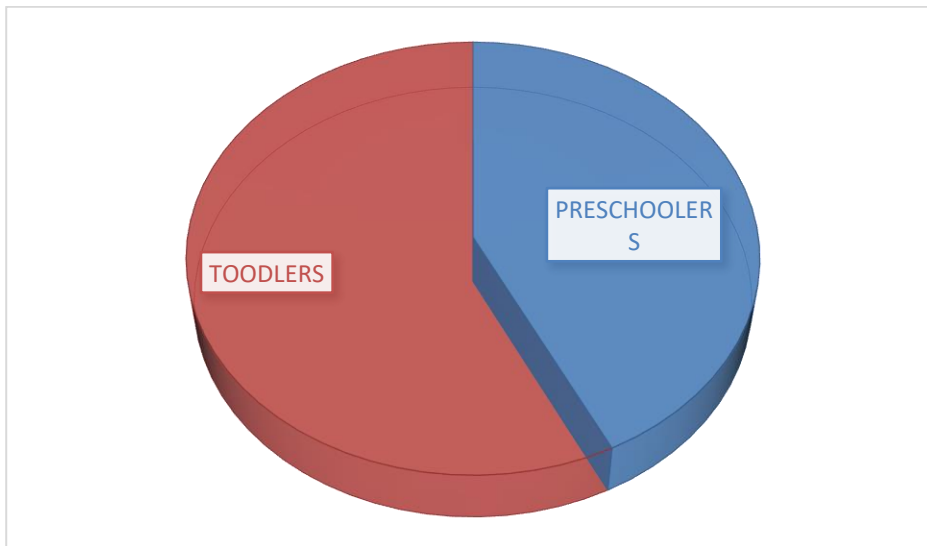In addition, 35 preschoolers and 47 toddlers were eventually included in the sample.

Figure 2: Proportion of school grades in the sample

Of the total sample, 38 children chose to trace a person from their nuclear family in the circle of trust, while 44 children chose to trace other persons.
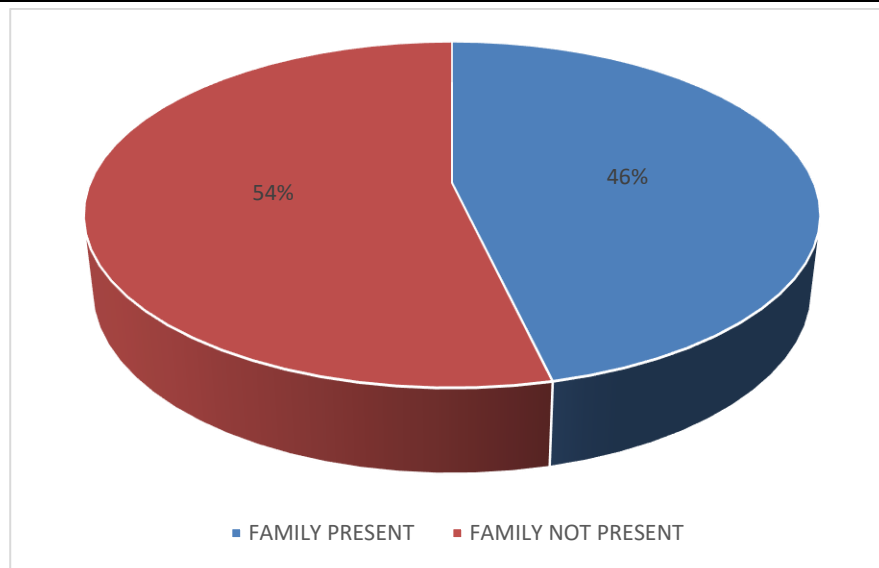
Figure 3: Presence of family in the tracing

3.3 Psychometric Instruments

Then, the children's kindergarten teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire "Criterion of school and social competence" for each child. The criterion was administered on a pilot basis and weighted in the period December 2007-June 2008. It is a reliable and valid tool weighted to the Greek reality. The construction and weighting of this psychometric tool were carried out in the framework of the project "Psychometric-differential assessment of children and adolescents with learning difficulties", co-funded by the European Union/ECT and the Ministry of Education and Culture, for which Mrs. M. Tzouriadou is the scientific responsible. The questionnaire, together with the examiner's guide and detailed instructions regarding administration, correction and interpretation, is available free of charge online for use and is also an assessment tool in the K.E.D.A.S.Y., a public service the psychologist served in.

This criterion assesses the psychosocial characteristics of children and adolescents related to school and social adjustment. It is aimed at 4-16 year olds. It includes two different types of questionnaires for individual age groups: one questionnaire addressed to teachers for children aged 4-8 years and two self-assessment questionnaires for children and adolescents aged 7-16 years. For the purposes of this study, the questionnaire for children aged 4-8 years was used and completed by the children's kindergarten teachers.

We know that a child's adaptation and good functioning in school life requires social skills, emotional maturity and the ability to build two-way and meaningful relationships. Moreover, school is the second most important context, after the family, where a child learns to define his or her world through an understanding of socially acceptable behaviors. That is, he or she learns to have self-control over his or her behavior and to recognize and express his or her emotions appropriately (Robins & Rutter, 1990; Kopp *et al.*, 1992). Furthermore, at this age, the influence of the family and the bonds with caregivers play an important role in both the mental health and social education a child

receives, since, developmentally, parents are extremely important and unquestionable role models (Cole & Cole, 2001). When a child displays difficulties in proportion to their chronological age, they are considered to be a child 'at risk' for developing antisocial behaviors, emotional deficits and adjustment difficulties (Kopp *et al.*, 1992).

The School and Social Competence Criterion consists of 30 questions. As for the scoring of the questions, the examiner's guide contains a key to correct the questions to be scored.

As for the analysis and grouping of the questions, these 30 questions are divided into 3 categories:

a) externalized reactions (questions: 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 28),
b) internalized reactions (questions: 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24), and
c) adaptive behavior (questions: 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, 27, 29, 30).
   In addition, a total score is calculated from the sum of all 30 questions.

Externalized reactions refer to the behaviors that the child uses to release physical and emotional tension and are perceived by the environment. Such behaviors can be the use of violence, whether he or she follows the rules, fights or reacts to the teacher, etc.

Internalized responses refer to behaviors assessed through the child's internalized functioning and are assessed through verbal and non-verbal responses, for example, attachment to the caregiver, highly embodied anxiety, and frequent adoption of crying as a means of discharging emotional tension. Adaptive responses are behaviors related to functioning in the context of adaptation to the school environment and these could be symbolic play, interaction with the kindergarten teacher, if he/she transfers experiences from home if parents seem satisfied, etc.)

For the purposes of this study, the sample was divided into two groups, depending on whether or not a caregiver existed in the trust circles (YES group, NO group). Statistical analyses were then performed between the two groups for both the total score of the school and social competence criterion, as well as for the individual scores of the 3 different categories, externalized reactions (OUT), internalized reactions (IN), adaptive behavior (ADAP), the total score (TOTAL) as rated by the teachers.

4. Results

The research attempt, through statistical analysis, showed strong correlations (p<0.01) between all the children's dysfunctional behavioral responses to be studied and the existence of an insecure attachment or even the absence of this attachment with key caregivers. Statistical analysis of the data revealed a strong correlation between the child's relationship with caregivers and the child's developmental trajectory as assessed within the context of the child's educational life.

Table 1: Results of comparison of total scale scores

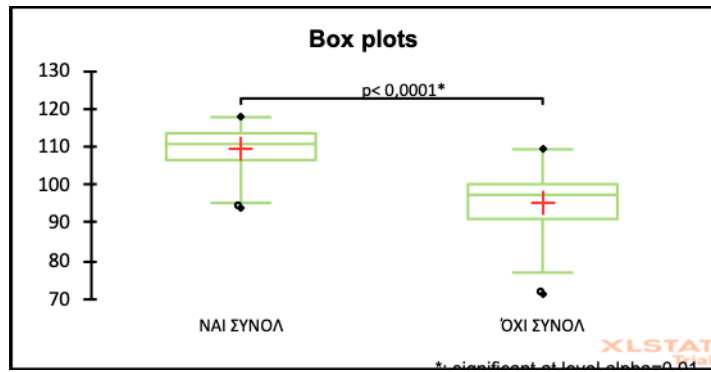| Mean Total Yes	Mean Total No	P Value
109,47	95,30	<0,0001

Figure 4: Illustration of comparison of total scale scores

Table 2: Results comparing scores of externalized behaviors

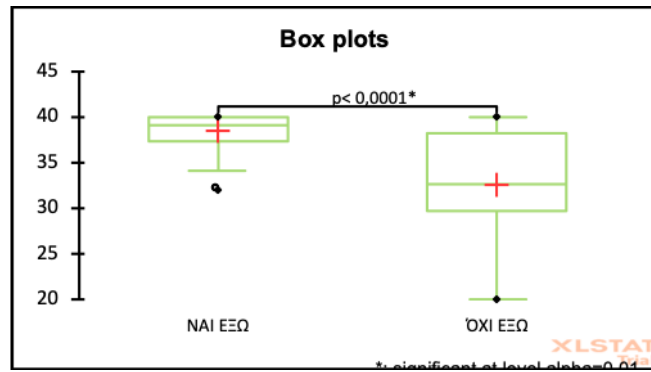| Mean Yes Out	Mean Not Out	P Value
38,39	32,66	<0,0001

Figure 5: Comparison of scores of externalized behaviors

Table 3: Results comparing scores of internalized behaviors
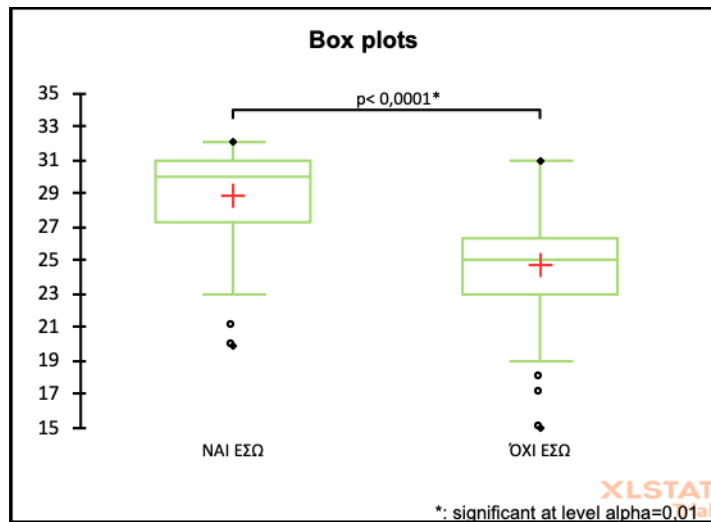
Mean Yes In	Mean Not In	P Value
28,89	24,75	<0,0001

Figure 6: Comparison of scores of internalized behaviors

Table 4: Results comparing scores of adaptive behaviors

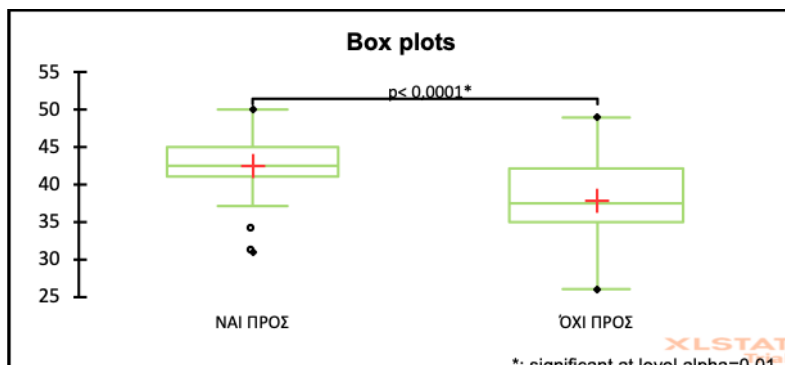| Mean Yes Adapt	Mean Not Adapt	P Value
42,37	37,88	<0,0001

Figure 7: Comparison of scores of adaptive behaviors

5. Discussion of Results

From the statistical analysis of the data of the present study, we can conclude that there is a clear correlation between the relationship with the caregiver and the developmental progress of a child, which is in line with a large body of research data (Winnicott, 1945; Fagot & Kavanagh, 1990; Koiv, 2012; Werner, 2005, etc.). The results demonstrated the strong association of caregiver absence in the context of children's trust with lower scores in all developmental and social domains assessed by this questionnaire. There appeared to be a statistically significant difference in children's externalizing reactions, as described through the tendency to aggression and violent responses when a caregiver belonging to the nuclear family was absent. This is quite close to the results of studies showing a tendency to aggression, difficulties in anger management and dysfunctional unresponsiveness in children with insecure attachment bonds, especially possibly rejective/avoidant attachments (Campbell & Ewing, 1990; White *et al.*, 1993; Rhee and Waldman, *et al.*, 2002). The association between insecure attachment and dysfunctional behaviors in terms of children's externalizing responses also concurs with the findings of Walden and Beran (2010), who reported a strong association between insecure attachment bonds and aggressive behavior or even bullying in children in Canada.

The results of the present research reaffirm the importance of early attachment for the holistic developmental trajectory of children and add to the extensive research attempts already in place (Winnicott, 1945; Bowlby, 1969; Atkinson *et al.*, 2000a; Van IJzendoorn, 1997). Furthermore, the high correlation indices obtained for children's generally adaptive and functional behavior in relation to the closeness they feel with security persons is consistent with the data from a post-analysis of 3500 children, such as that presented by Schneider and colleagues (2001), who concluded that there is a clear, consistent and strong relationship between attachment to a mother or caregiver and a child's behavioral responses in late childhood. Children who were closer to caregivers and had formed close, trusting relationships appeared to be more prepared and more

functional in their social interactions with peers and adults, which is confirmed by the data from the present study.

It is well studied, that preschool children who display strong and overt behavioral problems, such as aggression and concentration problems, are more likely to maintain these difficulties and develop them into non-functional behaviors (Campbell & Ewing, 1990; White *et al.*, 1993). These children belong to a highly heterogeneous group in terms of the characteristics and causality of their behavior and, therefore, it is extremely difficult to group (Tremblay, 2000) and identify them.

Understanding, therefore, the need for early intervention and detection has been extensively studied and attributed by a plethora of research efforts (McMahon *et al.*, 2006; Hinshaw & Lee, 2003; Parke & Slaby, 1983; La Grutta *et al.*, 2022) as well as investing in the importance of using analogue methods such as tracing or narration for preschool children (Chapman, 1993; Luget, 1991; Loizou, 1996), the value of the present research becomes clear. It is a dynamic and enduring goal of all educators and mental health professionals to identify dysfunctional behaviors in the early school years. Family systems remain more flexible to change and more available to communicate with school settings (Cavanagh and Huston 2008; Cavanagh *et al.* 2008; Cooper *et al.* 2011; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Frisco *et al.* 2007; Frisco *et al.* Hao and Xie 2002; Li 2007; Magnuson and Berger 2009; Osborne and McLanahan 2007).

There are important limitations in our research that are worth mentioning. The sample comes from a specific geographical area, and it would be interesting to include new geographical areas with different cultural and social characteristics in future research. In addition, the data collected from the teachers' questionnaires are subject to the limitations of self-report and subjectivity. Teachers' responses are often loaded with information about their personal relationships with students. It would be advisable in subsequent research attempts to have similar questionnaires completed by parents. The programme can be integrated into the curriculum of the Kindergarten (as detailed above) and additionally enriched with many activities from Involved Subject Areas such as Language (A.A.1.), T.E.T. (A.A.2.) and Arts (A.D.2.), especially in the enrichment phase of the teaching, so that children can better consolidate the concepts.

In this paper, a clear trend emerges, which helps us to realize the original purpose of this research. The ultimate goal was to explore a comprehensive educational proposal, a tool in the hands of teachers in order to be able to easily identify children who are at possible risk of developing behavioral and emotional difficulties, and as such a tool, this proposal can certainly be used. In adverse social conditions, such as the ones we live in, with many social changes and insecurities, we welcome children with significant difficulties in managing behaviour and emotions in our schools. School can be a protective factor for these children (Hatzichristou, Lykitsakou, Lampropoulou, & Dimitropoulou, 2010; Henderson & Milstein, 2008. Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2009) and can contribute substantially to opening a channel of communication between the school and the family with the mental resilience of the pupil as its centre and goal. The use of means of analogical expression, such as tracing (Gross and Hayne, 1998; Knoff & Prout, 1985;

Naglieri, 1988) or narrative (Lane and Wright, 2007), and the interpretation of the data generated, not in terms of causal associations, but as a tool that provides valuable information - clues, is an excellent way to initiate this effort. Children with broken relationships with primary caregivers often seek care and love in the person of the teacher. It is essential to be present and selfless in our efforts, not in terms of substituting for the parental role, but in terms of making ourselves available in a way that opens up new unifying conversations with the family and creates a new experience of interplay.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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