

Identifying gender differences in reading preferences and strategies employed by Greek students: A socio-cognitive perspective

1. *Eleni Griva, University of Western Macedonia- Greece*
2. *Anastasia Alevriadou, University of Western Macedonia- Greece*
3. *Klio Semoglou, University of Western Macedonia- Greece*

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to identify the correlation between gender and reading preferences and reading strategies employed by 5th and 6th Grade students of primary school in Greece. The main objectives of the present study were a) to identify possible differences between male and female students in employing cognitive and metacognitive strategies, b) to record the difficulties encountered by males and females when reading and c) to highlight possible differences between male and female students in reading preferences. 405 Greek students (206 boys and 199 girls, M=11.21 years old, SD.=0.47) participated in the study and were asked to fill in a questionnaire including questions related to reading preferences and attitudes. In addition, thirty two students from the total sample were asked to choose their favourite text to read and think aloud about the processes they followed and the strategies they used. The questionnaire results indicated significant differences between male and female students in reading preferences, since the female students showed a greater preference for 'human-interest' stories and male preferred to read comics and action-stories. The verbal data revealed the female students' flexibility in strategy use and their higher metacognitive awareness compared to male students. A particular focus of the discussion was on the possible factors, being in a dynamic interplay with the social context (family and school), which influence male and female students' reading preferences and define differences in reading strategies. 'Reading and gender' factors are discussed in the light of modern sociocultural theories.

1. Introduction

Reading has been defined as a complex cognitive process that involves various mechanisms employed for reading comprehension purposes and/or constructing meaning (Anderson, 1994; Anderson & Pearson, 1984). It is also a sociocultural process, which is based on students' prior knowledge and at the same time it helps broadening students' experiences and knowledge (Green, 2002). A great deal of research has focused on the cognitive aspects of reading (see for example Adams, 1990) and has stressed the need to consider the balance between cognitive and social aspects of reading and literacy (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Research into reading showed that successful promotion of reading takes place mainly at home and school (Kraaykamp, 2001; Van Peer, 1991). Students' attitudes to reading can be influenced by their experiences, which can change over the primary school years and may differ for female students and male students. Children bring their family and cultural values, experiences and beliefs as they begin schooling (Comber, 2004; Thomson, 2002). Besides, school-based reading activities promote students' identity as a reader and their attitude towards reading (McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Turner & Paris, 1995). The family background and school context can influence students' preferences and contribute to shaping students' reading attitudes and preferences (Myoungsoon & Heekyoung, 2002). The importance of parent/family involvement has been highlighted as a basic factor that can help children improve reading by providing motivating and pleasurable experiences with books and literacy (Ellen, 1994). Research data have shown that parental involvement with reading activities at home has significant positive influences on students' interest in reading, and their attitudes towards reading classroom (Rowe, 1991). Especially, mothers become systematically responsible for the literary socialization of their children.

Furthermore, a lot of researchers have investigated and indicated differences between male and female students in reading preferences, reading performance and strategy use (e.g., Biigel & Buunk, 1996; Chavez, 2001). In addition, a number of studies have revealed gender differences in the amount of time allocated/devoted to reading. It has also been found that a higher percentage of girls indulge in leisure reading than boys (Abilock, 2002; Swalander & Taube, 2007). The females show a more positive attitude to reading (see Swalander & Taube, 2007) and a preference for reading a variety of genres compared to males (Clark, Osborne & Akerman, 2008).

Concerning the text genres, it has been revealed that boys preferred adventure, science fiction and sports stories, while girls enjoyed animal stories and stories about teenage problems (Simpson, 1998), as well as romance, friendship, animal stories and historical fiction. Shelly (1999) found that the 6th to 8th grade children have stronger preference for humour and horror stories, followed by mysteries, historical fiction, adventure and science fiction. Also, in Abilock's study (2002) it was revealed that the girls preferred to read books about both males and females, while the boys would choose fiction about males.

Moreover, the effect of gender on language strategy use has been thoroughly investigated (Chandler, Lizotte & Rowe, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Griva & Alevriadou, 2009; Griva et al, 2009). Reading strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) have been classified into a) cognitive, which involve direct interaction with the text and application of specific techniques that facilitate comprehension (Carrell, 1989; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993) and b) metacognitive strategies, which function to monitor or regulate cognitive strategies (Devine, 1993; Oxford, 1990), include knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition (Carrel, 2005).

A lot of studies (Chavez, 2001; Ehrman & Oxford 1989; Oxford & Nyikos 1989) found a wide range of gender differences in the frequency and flexibility of strategy use. That is, female students employ a variety of reading strategies in coming to terms with the text and 'dealing' with the comprehension of the messages of the text (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Singhal, 2001). On the other hand, in Lee's study (1994) it was revealed that girls showed more frequent use of cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies than boys in middle school, but not in high school and college.

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate primary school students' reading preferences and interests, as well as the strategies the students employ when reading. More precisely, it aimed at: a) highlighting possible differences between male and female students in reading preferences; b) identifying possible differences between male and female students in employing cognitive and metacognitive strategies; c) recording the difficulties encountered by males and females when reading; d) examining the possible influence of parents' education/occupation on students' reading behavior.

2. The study

2.1 Sample

The sample consisted of a total of 405 fifth and sixth grade students (206 male students and 199 female students), aged between 10 and 12 ($M=11.2$ years-old, $SD=0.45$). Concerning their parents' education profile, the majority of fathers' and mothers' have a degree in higher education (table 1). As regards their parents' occupation, most of their mothers have a profession that can be regarded as a "low autonomy profession".

Table 1. Parents' education background

Parent education background	father	mother
Primary education	31 (7.7%)	15 (3.7%)
Secondary education	155 (38.3%)	136 (33.6%)
Tertiary education	219 (54.1%)	254 (62.7%)

Table 2. Parents' occupation background

Occupation	father's	mother's
Low autonomy profession	211 (52.1%)	274 (67.7%)
High autonomy profession	194 (47.9%)	131 (32.3%)

2.2 Methodology

The study, which followed a qualitative and quantitative approach of data collection, was conducted through two basic phases:

In the *first phase*, a self-report questionnaire was administered to 405 students to fill. The questionnaire comprised three basic sections: a) attitudes towards leisure reading; b) preferences for text genres; c) difficulties encountered while reading schoolbooks. It included 'likert-type' questions: the students were asked to indicate their preferences with 16 attitudinal statements on a scale ranging from 1 (very much) to 4 (little).

The *second phase* of the study was conducted by using “think aloud” process and retrospective interviews as the basic instruments. 32 students (16 girls and 16 boys) were selected to participate in this phase. They were selected according to their positive attitude to reading and their reading performance. Each student was exposed to five texts (of about 300 words): one gender-neutral text, two texts with a ‘male’ topic and two texts with a ‘female’ topic: a) *nutrition*, b) *football*, c) *electronics*, d) *ballet*, and e) *fashion*. They were selected with the assumption that the theme the students choose to read will be familiar to the participants, eliciting strong interest in the texts.

The participants were asked to report on their thoughts while they were completing the reading task (Garner, 1987), that is to think aloud all the techniques and procedures they used, as well as the difficulties they encountered. Retrospective interviews were conducted with each of the students, after terminating their reading; they were asked to comment on their strategic processes retrospectively and to assess their awareness of the reading tasks (Morrison, 1996).

2.3 Data analysis

Data derived from the questionnaire were analyzed by using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages for all items of the questionnaires were obtained. Moreover, the techniques of chi-square-test (χ^2) (Ind. Cramer’s V), t-test, ANOVA were performed.

The verbal data underwent both qualitative and quantitative analysis: Data reduction resulted in groups of categories/sub-categories (table 7). In addition, frequencies and percentages for all categories/subcategories were obtained. The techniques of chi-square-test (χ^2) and t-test were performed in order to identify differences in strategy use between male and female students.

3. Results

3.1 Questionnaire results

3.1.1 Out of school reading preferences

Regarding out of school reading, a higher percentage of female students indulge in leisure reading than male ones ($\chi^2=75.022$, $df=3$, $p<.000$). A greater percentage of girls also stated that they spend money on buying books ($\chi^2=31.065$,

df=3, $p<.000$) and go to the lending library than boys ($x^2=28.337$, df=3, $p<.000$). On the other hand, it was the boys, who gave higher percentages in terms of a) preferring watching TV to reading books ($x^2=24,184$, df=3, $p<.000$) and b) playing computer games to reading books ($x^2=30.554$, df=3, $p<.000$) (table 3).

It is worth mentioning that the interaction between mothers' occupation ($x^2=21.667$, df=3, $p<.000$) as well as mother's education ($x^2=26.944$, df=3, $p<.000$) and children's leisure reading was significant, the since children whose mothers have a "high autonomy profession" and a university degree showed a higher preference for leisure reading. Moreover, the fathers' education background ($x^2=12.739$, df=3, $p<.005$) as well as the fathers' occupation ($x^2=33.584$, df=3, $p<.001$) proved to be significant: the higher the parents' education and occupation, the greater the children's reading preference.

In relation to going to the lending library, their mothers' occupational background ($x^2=30.898$ df=3, $p<.000$) as well as their fathers' occupational background ($x^2=9.111$ df=3, $p<.05$) proved to be significant: the higher the parents' education and occupation, the more positive was the children's attitudes to buying books.

Besides, the students' attitudes to buying books were influenced by their mothers' occupational ($x^2=17.184$ df=3, $p<.01$) and educational ($x^2=9.201$, df=3, $p<.05$) background. Also, their fathers' educational background ($x^2=12.461$ df=3, $p<.01$) proved to be significant: the higher the parents' education and occupation, the more positive was the children's attitudes to buying books.

Table 3. Out of school reading preferences

Questions	very much (n)		much (n)		fairly (n)		Very little (n)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	boys	girls	Boys	girls
I like leisure reading	17	78	83	62	75	59	31	-
I like buying books	12	32	30	46	126	112	38	9
I like going to the library	6	40	55	25	90	94	55	40
I prefer watching TV to reading	105	91	58	27	34	60	9	21

books								
I prefer computer games to reading books	104	80	61	33	27	70	14	16

3.1.2 Preferred types of reading texts

In the effort made to specify the students' preferred types of texts, it was revealed that the top three choices related to reading texts for both male and female students were books with humorous stories (n=305), adventure books (n=248) and comics (n=196) (table 4). Statistically significant differences were revealed between male and female in relation to fairy tales ($x^2=32.517$ df=3, $p<.000$), comics ($x^2=22.127$ df=3, $p<.000$), sport magazines ($x^2=106.653$ df=3, $p<.000$), magazines (TV/music) ($x^2= 51.220$ df=3, $p<.000$) and poems ($x^2= 42.097$, df=3, $p<.000$).

More precisely, sport magazines were ranked higher by male (n=106) than female students. In addition, male students showed a marked preference for comics (n=119) compared to female ones (n=77). On the other hand, female students showed a greater interest in magazines (TV/music) (n=66) and poems (n=42) (table 4). Furthermore, students' preferred types of reading texts were influenced by mothers' occupational background in relation to poems ($x^2=20.701$, df=3, $p<.000$) and comics ($x^2=12.818$ df=3, $p<.046$).

Table 4. Preferred types of reading texts

Questions	very much (n)		much (n)		fairly (n)		very little (n)	
	boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	boys	girls	Boys	girls
Adventures	125	123	44	42	26	18	11	16
Fairytales	33	56	35	55	54	55	84	33
Comics	119	77	45	47	34	47	8	28
funny stories	160	145	21	23	19	15	6	6
Sport magazines	106	16	35	32	27	32	38	119
magazines (TV, fashion etc)	38	66	11	45	87	37	70	51
Poems	9	42	34	30	41	61	122	66

3.1.3 Difficulties

With reference to the *difficulties* the students encountered while reading, it was declared that they face great difficulty in extensive reading, skimming the text for gist and learning a text by heart and understanding complex sentences/paragraphs (table 5). The frequency distribution of the data showed that the most difficult sub-skills were considered to be the following:

Most of the students rated 'learning a text by heart' highly in difficulty (64 boys and 73 girls), as they felt very anxious whenever they read a text and encountered comprehension problems. In addition, 'skimming the text for gist' was of high difficulty for a certain number of male (n=42) and female students (n=59). Complex/long sentences were declared to cause some problems to students to comprehend a text sufficiently. Significant differences were found between the two groups ($\chi^2=12.014$, $df=3$, $p<.000$) as it was ranked higher by the female students. Besides, 'extensive reading' constitutes a major difficulty for the girls than the male students ($\chi^2= 9.880$, $df=3$, $p<.05$).

As regards the difficulties encountered with complex/long sentences/paragraphs in reading texts, the mothers' occupational background ($\chi^2=20.271$, $df=3$, $p<.005$) as well as the fathers' occupational background ($\chi^2=44.323$, $df=3$, $p<.000$) proved to be significant: the lower the parents' education and occupation, the more difficulties the children encountered. In addition, the mothers' occupational ($\chi^2=14.867$, $df=3$, $p<.05$) and the fathers' occupational ($\chi^2=22.627$, $df=3$, $p<.005$) background proved to be significant in relation to the difficulties children encountered in skimming the text for gist for comprehension purposes.

Table 5. Students' difficulties while reading school books

Questions	very much (n)		much (n)		fairly (n)		very little (n)	
	Boys	girls	Boys	girls	boys	girls	Boys	Girls
- Extensive reading	7	19	39	35	81	66	78	76
- Skimming the text for gist	18	29	24	30	72	60	92	77
- Learning a text by heart	23	26	41	47	69	72	73	51

(unknown words)								
- Complex sentences/paragraphs	19	19	18	30	35	51	134	96

3.2 Results of “think aloud’ process

3.2.1 Preferred reading topics

Regarding the students’ preference for choosing the texts they would like to read and think aloud, the main effect of gender and topic of reading text (*nutrition, football, electronics, ballet and fashion*) was analyzed using non-parametric test chi-square. Statistical significant differences were indicated in relation to genre selection ($\chi^2=19,143$. $df=4$, $p<.001$). The two gender related topics *ballet* (38.5%) and *fashion* (30.8%) received the highest degree of preference mostly from female students. In addition, the students, irrespective their gender, showed interest in reading the text with ‘neutral’ topic (*nutrition*). However, a strong tension among male students to prefer reading two ‘masculine’ related topics, *football* (46.2%) and *electronics* (30.8%) was revealed (table 6).

Table 6. Students’ preferred topics of reading texts

	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5	Total
	<i>Nutrition</i>	<i>Football</i>	<i>Electronics</i>	<i>Ballet</i>	<i>Fashion</i>	
Male students	23.1%	46.2%	30.8%	-	-	100.0%
Female students	30.8%	-	-	38.5%	30.8%	100.0 %
Total	26.9%	23.1%	15.4%	19.2%	15.4%	100.0%

3.2.2. Verbal data

Students’ verbal data, after being coded, resulted into twenty three categories, which were grouped into three basic themes: a) cognitive strategies, b) metacognitive strategies, c) text selection (table 7).

Table 7. Categories and subcategories of cognitive and metacognitive strategies

Categories	Subcategories
Student profile	
1. TEXT SELECTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference • Rejection
2. COGNITIVE STRATEGIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skimming for gist • Scanning • Using titles • Imagery • Guessing from the context • Activating background knowledge • Using synonyms • Looking up in a dictionary • Summarizing • Decoding the words • Repeating a word/phrase • Underlining key words/phrases • Underlining unknown words • Skipping a word/phrase • Note taking
3. METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selective attention • Prediction and verification • Control of reading comprehension • Rereading for overcoming difficulties • Error Identification and Self correction

Cognitive strategies

The participants employed a significant number of *cognitive* strategies to facilitate reading and to make the text more comprehensible, like ‘underlining’, ‘skimming’, ‘scanning’, ‘using imagery’, ‘finding key-words’, ‘placing words in the context’, ‘writing down the unknown words’, ‘skipping the difficult parts’, and ‘consulting a dictionary’(table 8). Crosstabulation revealed statistically significant differences between male and female students in the following cognitive strategies.

A) ‘Activating background knowledge’ was used by the majority of the students in order to facilitate reading. However, the comparison between the two groups indicated statistically significant gender differences ($x^2=5.098$. $df=2$, $p<.005$), since the vast majority of the girls employed the specific strategy more frequently and efficiently (92.3%) than the boys (61.5%).

B) A considerable number of students made use of the title and the pictures before starting reading the text in order to make it comprehensible. As regards the ‘imagery’, statistically significant differences were found between female and male

students ($x^2=6.992$. $df=2$, $p<.005$). Only 7.7 % of the boys used the pictures in order to facilitate comprehension in contrast to girls (53.8%).

C) ‘Guessing from the context’ was employed with a high degree of flexibility and frequency by the majority of the students, irrespectively their gender (76.9% of the male and 61.5% of the female students).

D) ‘Underlining’ either key words/phrases or unknown words ($x^2=6.671$, $df=2$, $p<.005$) was employed efficiently mostly by girls (61.6%). However, the boys showed little preference for ‘underlining’ (15.4%). Although a smaller number of the students employed the strategy of ‘decoding the words’ for comprehension purposes, significant differences were found between the two subgroups ($x^2=5.221$. $df=2$, $p<.005$); it was a more favourite strategy for the girls, since it was used by the girls either efficiently (23.1%) or partially (23.1%) in contrast to the boys (15.4%) (table 8).

E) Both groups (male and female students) showed much preference for skimming the text for the gist. More precisely, the majority of the girls were engaged in this process either efficiently (53.8%) or partially (38.5%); also, a considerable number of the boys (53.8%) placed emphasis on ‘skimming’ by employing it effectively. Significant differences were indicated between boys and girls regarding the following cognitive strategies, which proved to be less favourite ones: a) ‘summarizing’ ($x^2=5.727$. $df=1$, $p<.005$), which was used by 30.8% efficiently, but none of the boys was found to use it; b) ‘note taking’ ($x^2=5.983$. $df=1$, $p<.005$): 38.5% were engaged in using it efficiently, meanwhile 100% of the boys used it ineffectively (table 8).

Table 8. Cognitive strategies employed by male and female students

Cognitive strategies	Male			Female		
	0	1	2	0	1	2
Skimming for gist	15.4%	30.8%	53.8%	7.7%	38.5%	53.8%
Scanning	-	53.8%	46.2%	7.7%	30.8%	61.5%
Using titles	-	7.7%	92.3%	-	15.4%	84.6%
Imagery	30.8%	61.5%	7.7%	7.7%	38.5%	53.8%
Guessing from the context	-	23.1%	76.9%	-	38.5%	61.5%
Activating background knowledge	15.4%	23.1%	61.5%	-	7.7%	92.3%
Looking up in a dictionary	92.3%	7.7%	-	76.9%	23.1%	-
Summarizing	100%	-	-	69.2%	30.8%	-
Decoding the words	84.6%	-	15.4%	53.8%	23.1%	23.1%
Underlining key words/phrases	84.6%	-	15.4%	38.5%	30.8%	30.8%
Skipping a word/phrase	46.2%	53.8%	-	69.2%	30.8%	-
Note taking	100%	-	-	61.5%	38.5%	-

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Metacognitive strategies

From a total of five metacognitive strategies reported in the study, ‘rereading’ was the most favourite strategy among male (100%) and female students (92.3%). No significant relationship was found between ‘rereading for clarifying certain points’ and gender. Moreover, no significant differences were found between the two groups in relation to ‘selective attention’, since both boys and girls seemed to be less aware of this strategy (table 9).

However, there were significant relations between ‘reading comprehension control’ strategy and reading group ($x^2=6.196$ $df=2$, $p<.005$); the female students reported this strategy more efficiently (69.2%) than the male ones, who did not manage to use it in an effective way (38.5%). The female students had also significantly higher efficiency of awareness in ‘identifying errors’ and ‘self correcting’ than the male ones ($x^2=5.295$ $df=2$, $p<.005$).

It is worth mentioning that a considerable number of students showed a positive attitude towards evaluating their own reading, and both male and female students placed emphasis on improving the following subskills: a) reading sentence by sentence, b) prosodic reading and c) rapid reading.

Table 9. Metacognitive strategies employed by male and female students

Metacognitive strategies	Male			Female		
	0	1	2	0	1	2
Selective attention	76.9%	23.1%	-	84.6%	15.4%	-
Control of reading comprehension	38.5%	15.4%	46.2%	7.7%	23.1%	69.2%
Rereading for overcoming difficulties			100%		7.7%	92.3%
Prediction and verification	15.4%	53.8%	30.8%		69.2%	30.8%
Error Identification and Self correction	15.4%	84.6%		15.4%	46.2%	38.5%

Moreover, the independent sample t-test indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the two subgroups (male and female students) in using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies ($p<0.05$) (table 10).

Table 10. Mean scores in cognitive and metacognitive strategy use

Strategies	Boys	Girls
Cognitive	6.77 (SD 1.01)	8.26 (SD 1.96)
Metacognitive	3.84 (SD 0.69)	4.46 (SD 0.66)

4. Discussion

This study replicates the findings of previous studies (Brozo, 2002; Clark, Osborne & Akerman, 2008; Higginbotham, 1999; Kim et al., 2002; Merisuo-Storm, 2006) by supporting the assumption that there is a relationship between gender and the reading preferences/interests, the amount of time allocated for leisure reading, as well as the flexibility in strategy use. In addition, in the current study it was found that mothers' occupational and educational background proved to be significant as it influenced male and especially female students' preferences.

Furthermore, the female students were reported to make extensive use of a wider range of strategy repertoire and showed more strategic knowledge and flexibility in using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This is in accordance with the findings of much of the research published internationally (Chandler, Lizotte & Rowe, 1998; Green & Oxford, 1995; Griva & Alevriadou, 2009; Griva et al, 2009; Sy, 1994; Wharton, 2000).

Primary school should offer experiences and opportunities to develop students reading skills and strategies, as well as to build successfully on their experiences with literacy (Boyse & Simmons, 2004). Every school should promote and increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social and academic growth of the children by strengthening involvement in children's home and school reading. Developing collaborations between families and schools to promote reading success has a long-standing basis in research and is the focus of numerous programs and policies (Hill & Taylor, 2004). In the school context, both male and female teachers need to offer interesting reading material for both male and female students. A variety of text types can influence students' reading attitudes and enhance their motivation to read at school (Perry, Nordby & VandeKamp, 2003). Reading material/activities can promote a more positive attitude towards reading, when adjusted to students' home and cultural experiences as well as to gender preferences.

In addition, students (especially the male ones) need to be explicitly taught effective ways and strategies to read texts in order to increase their intrinsic motivation (Guthrie et al., 1996; Walker, 2003). Thus, schools should follow a process-oriented approach aiming to: a) promote reading awareness, accounting for students' linguistic and cognitive development and sociocultural background and b) encourage their growth of metacognitive skills by training them into a variety of strategies (see Carrell, 1989; Hartman, 2001; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Since 'reading and gender' remains an area open for research and discussion, several directions for future research could emerge considering sociocultural factors in a more rigorous way. Further research is needed to understand the associations between parental characteristics and reading to young children. This could contribute importantly to the development of improved literacy interventions for young children and their families (Yarosz & Barnett, 2001).

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Short bios

Dr Eleni Griva is a Lecturer at the University of Western Macedonia – Greece, in the School of Educational Studies (Department of Primary Education). She teaches courses related to a) L2/FL language learning and teaching, b) Bilingualism, c) Language learning strategies, d) Language Policy, e) alternative ways of assessing language skills, at Pre-graduate and Post-graduate level. Her research interests include: Learning and Teaching Modern languages, Language learning strategies, Bilingualism/multilingualism/multiculturalism, Language policy, Language and gender, teacher development. She has published two books. Her work has also been published in International and Greek journals and in International and Greek conference proceedings.

egriva@uowm.gr & egriva@otenet.gr

Dr Anastasia Alevriadou is an Associate Professor of Psychology of Special Education at the *University of Western Macedonia – Greece*. She teaches: ‘Teaching Special Education’, ‘Developmental Psychopathology’, ‘Learning Disabilities’. She has published a book and more than 70 articles in Greek and international journals and conference proceedings on these issues and she has participated in many European and International conferences.

alevriadou@uowm.gr

Dr Klio Semoglou, is an instructor at the University of Western Macedonia - Greece. Her main research interest is in complex movement behaviour, fine motor skills/graphomotor skills, eye-hand coordination and gender differences. She has participated in many European and International conferences and she has published several articles in Greek and international journals on these issues.

ksemoglou@uowm.gr & ksemoglou@gmail.com