



**THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:
SPECIAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUPILS WITH MILD
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES TALK ABOUT THEIR
EXPERIENCE FROM A SOCIAL CO-EXISTENCE PROGRAM**

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Abstract:

Formally, inclusive education is part of the primary policies in the Greek educational system. However, pupils with intellectual disabilities still attend special schools and their socialization is mainly monitored through the implementation of social co-existence programs in the school setting. The present study aimed to explore the outcomes of a social co-existence program that was implemented in two co-located schools, a general education elementary school and a special education elementary school. Semi-structured interviews with the special education elementary school pupils were used for pre- and post-intervention assessments. Qualitative analyses of the data revealed important differentiations in the ways pupils with intellectual disabilities understood a) their social interaction with typically developing peers and b) acceptance by peers. In fact, the pupils with intellectual disabilities consistently acknowledged that participation in the social co-existence program enhanced their social interactions and improved acceptance by peer.

Keywords: the social dimension of inclusion, social co-existence program, intellectual disabilities, school psychological support, Greece

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1. Introduction

In Greece, there is a significant divergence: on the one hand there are numerous declarations about the importance of the social dimension of inclusion for school life and, on the other hand, there is the reality of the dominant formal policy, which is defined, planned and implemented by the competent bodies. Since last decade various voices have been raised to highlight the importance of inclusion in education and social life for pupils with mild intellectual disabilities. However, and despite formal declarations, *“there is a large chasm between loud voices and weak practices”* (Zoniou – Sideri & Vlachou 2002, 380).

2. Literature Review

There is, indeed, a contradiction between Greek legislation and real life educational practices. More specifically, whereas the social dimension of inclusion for pupils with intellectual disabilities is statutorily acquired, real school practices reveal that there is no central providence for the implementation of inclusive programs and schools are not required to incorporate them into their curriculum (Tzouriadou & Barbas, 2000). On the contrary, the majority of Greek pupils with intellectual disabilities attend special schools. In many cases special and general education schools are collocated. It is, thus, evident that -in the Greek context- any possible attempt to include pupils with intellectual disabilities in the general educational processes is highly related to the particularities of each school unit, its specific features and its complex organizational or structural needs. Subsequently, the school’s philosophy and set of priorities define each time the suggestions and the directions given about possible ways of implementing psycho-educational programs to promote social co-existence between pupils with intellectual disabilities and their peers.

In addition, most of the respective interventions in Greece are part of EU funding programs, while university faculties control and coordinate their implementation. There are, also, very few schools –usually situated within a short distance –involved. All things considered, it is evident that benefits from the implementation of social co-existence programs in schools are, most of the times, short-termed and locally-oriented (Vasileiadis & Doikou- Avlidou, 2018).

The international literature describes a variety of social co-existence programs and each one possesses distinct features (Hughes et al., 2002). There are, however, some similarities, since these programs are usually highly structured and last for 1-2 school periods per week. Moreover, educators and/or school psychologists are mostly responsible for their implementation. Participants are usually pupils from general education schools, while pupils with intellectual disabilities tend not to participate to the same extent (Mu, Siegel & Allinder, 2000). All the participants are, usually, invited to join various academic and social activities that are linked to school’s everyday life (Hughes et

al. 2002). In general, these programs' basic scope is to establish stable and consistent social interactions between pupils with intellectual disabilities and their typically developing peers so that pre-existing prejudices and negative attitudes towards the formers can be altered and/or lifted. In other words, they aim to promote in a systematic and sustainable way the social dimension of inclusive education (Tzouriadou & Barbas, 2000).

However, most studies that focus on highlighting the social inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities are oriented in collecting quantitative data. Furthermore, they usually center on the exploration and presentation of views and beliefs held by the adult parties involved (educators, parents, etc.). To the authors' knowledge, there are very few qualitatively oriented studies which put into focus the views of pupils with intellectual disabilities, who are the true acting subjects of the inclusive processes.

Taking all the above into consideration, the present study's purpose was to explore whether elementary school pupils with intellectual disabilities report any changes in their interpersonal and social relationships after participating in a social co-existence program with typically developing peers.

More specifically, the study aimed a) to investigate whether -post the implementation of the social co-existence program- there were any differentiations in the quality and the frequency of interactions between the pupils with intellectual disabilities and their typically developing peers, b) to explore whether there were any post-implementation differentiations- and towards which end- in terms of peer acceptance. It should be mentioned that the implementation of the social co-existence program described in this article was part of a larger, multi-dimensional and multi-methodological doctorate research project which looked into the social dimension of inclusion in the Greek educational system.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Participants

Two collocated elementary schools in a southern Greek island (a general education school and a special education one) were involved in the study. More specifically, participants were pupils from two school classes, one from each school, who took part in this study's social co-existence program. The participants' group, or else the co-existence group, consisted of a) sixteen (16) first graders from the general education elementary school and b) three (3) special elementary school pupils with mild intellectual disabilities, two boys and one girl aged 6 to 7 years. The pupils from the special education school were chosen on the basis of their age, the type of their diagnosis and the fact that they had never been part of a pedagogical or psychological school intervention program. Furthermore, all of the participants had been classmates in preschool; they had a common past in early education and, therefore, many shared school experiences.

Taking into account the absolute number of Greek special schools' pupils (Barbas et al., 2006), it can be argued that the relatively small number of participants with

intellectual disabilities is sufficient and in line with the Greek standards. It is also in accordance with internationally set standards about qualitative research projects that include special schools' pupils (Hughes et al., 2002).

3.2 Procedure and setting

A. The social co-existence program

In line with the respective literature, a social co-existence program was designed and implemented for the purposes of the study. It aimed a) to enhance the social inclusion of the intellectually disabled participants, b) to encourage them to express both the difficulties they face and the wishes they have and c) to foster their ability to transfer and apply- in the short and long term- their positive experiences in various social settings (e.g. the school, the family, the neighborhood, the peer group, etc.).

Prior to the implementation of the program, the first author - who was the special school's school psychologist- presented the theoretical background, the procedure that would be followed and the results that were expected to the teaching staff and the participants' parents.

The program was integrated into the school's formal curriculum and its implementation was coordinated and facilitated by the first author and the 1st grade's teacher. Fourteen meetings were held, overall, in predetermined school days; each meeting lasted for approximately two school periods and took place, mainly, in one of the special school's classrooms, in which there were no toys or any other play related objects. The presence of toys tends to guide and predetermine children's activities; therefore, this specific set up aimed to create an environment that encourages communication and physical touch and to ameliorate participants' interpersonal relationships. Four of the meetings, however, were held at the general education school, at the 1st grade's classroom, so that the special school pupils could have the chance to familiarize with the setting of a general education school.

Each meeting consisted of numerous activities that were related to the various aspects of communication, interaction and interpersonal relationships. The participants negotiated through them relevant issues as well as issues related to their everyday school or social experiences. In general, the meetings were planned and organized on the basis of a method called "*the non-directive intervention*", which was introduced by Michel Lobrot (1989).

B. The interviews

The special school's pupils who participated in the social co-existence program were interviewed twice; the first interview took place during the first week and the second one during the last two weeks of the intervention. The first author, after obtaining the necessary parental consent, conducted the interviews in the special school's setting. Each interview was recorded and lasted for approximately 27 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a predetermined protocol. Semi-structured interviews

were selected as the primary source of data collection, because they offer flexibility and provide more useful data in a small-scale research (Drever, 1995). They also allow an in-depth exploration of participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs about topics and issues that are more personal and/or sensitive. In other words, semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to collect open-ended data, which they can analyze qualitatively (Alvarez & Urla, 2002).

3.3 Methodological instrument

The research team created an interview guide to serve the study's purposes and facilitate the interview process. The open-ended script that was developed entailed open-ended questions which were based on research findings and methodological instruments used in similar, mainly European, studies (see Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster, et al., 2009). The fact that the guide's thematic axes were strongly related to those created for similar research projects strengthened its reliability level.

The guide's validity was also tested; a school psychologist and a special educator, who were not fully informed about the study's purpose, were asked to comment on the guide's content. Their remarks were taken into account and reshaped the guide's final formation. This way the researchers ascertained that the interview guide could indeed explore the views and beliefs of pupils with intellectual disabilities about the study's sensitive topics.

Overall, the interview's open-ended questions revolved around the same thematic axes, both pre and post intervention. There were two axes, which are presented more specifically below:

- Social interactions with typically developing peers: This axis consisted of ten open-ended questions about a) the types of social activities mostly preferred by the interviewees, b) the interviewees' estimations about their level of participation and their role in each social activity. Some other questions explored whether the pupils with intellectual disabilities took any initiatives for social contact. Finally, a few questions aimed to highlight their views about peers' responses to their initiatives.
- Peer acceptance: The ten open-ended questions which formed this axis aimed to explore the perceived level of acceptance, or non-acceptance, by peers. More specifically, there were questions about a) the perceived level of peer acceptance in team activities, b) the perceived level of peer support in everyday activities as well as the perceived level of peer rejection or bullying in the school setting and in the broader social milieu.

Despite the fact that the interviews main topics and subtopics were decided in advance, the interviewees still had the freedom and the flexibility to decide what needed to be argued and/or elaborated. More specific questions also emerged, occasionally, at the course of an interview, during the exploration of the defined topics and sub-topics.

3.4 Data analysis

As mentioned above each interview was tape recorded and all discussions were later transcribed. This is a practice which is described as necessary for the researcher's better habituation to the collected data (Rapley, 2007). The textual data were then subjected to a qualitatively oriented content analysis, a method considered most appropriate for research projects which include semi-structured interviews (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). More specifically, the transcripts were thoroughly read in order to track similarities and/or differences, and to identify, subsequently, themes and developing categories. This was a time-consuming process, which sometimes appeared as cyclic. Repeated readings allowed, subsequently, the researchers to subdivide the raw pieces of information and assign them into categories.

4. Results

Content analysis revealed 3 major categories, which are thoroughly presented below. The first two categories, and their sub-categories, were related to the interview's thematic axes. The third one entails the participants' self-reflection and evaluations.

Phase A: Prior to the implementation of the social co-existence program

a. Social interactions with typically developing peers

- Level of participation in social activities and cooperation during team games in the school setting

"At school I don't play with the others and there is no one to keep me company. The others...the children from the big school, they don't want to play with me, sir, ... no... they don't help me either and I don't know their games." (Takis).

"I sit by myself, I have my toys and I don't care... the other children play a lot, but me, I have my sister at home, I don't know their games, they are complicated." (Valado).

"Ehhh...what now? The others don't fancy me, they hit and hurt me all the time, they don't want to play with me, it's better on my own... when I go near them and ask to join them, they don't want me." (John)

- Pupils' initiatives for social interaction

"My mum, sir, she tells me to play with the other children, those from the big school, but I don't go near that place, I just play with Simon." (Takis)

"They are classmates, they are close friends, and they play their own games... I go there and I give them my toys, so that we could play together, but they don't want me." (Valado).

"They always play those games, their games... we....what can we do in the special school when we are on our own? And when they approach me saying that I am the one who spoils their games?" (John).

b. Peer acceptance

- Acceptance in team / school activities

"They don't want us there and when we go they don't play with us at all; they mock us, most of all Lefteris." (Takis).

"... and when we all go into the next room [she means the self-regulation room], sir, they, they don't want us, they mock us." (Valado).

"When you are not present, sir, they don't want us and they play on their own. When you are present, they pretend to be good with us." (John).

- Social Rejection

"They don't want us to come near them, they don't come to the special school, they do that only when you and the other teacher ask them to." (Takis)

"They play on their own, they have their own games." (John)

"Sir, when the others don't watch, they spit on Lefteris and they call me stupid [she cries] you should scold them, sir." (Valado).

Phase B: Post the implementation of the social co-existence program

a. Social interactions with peers

- Level of participation in social activities and cooperation during team games in the school setting

"These days...now...we play with the others, in the big school, during school breaks; we play with my toys as well... Gormiti and Ben Ten [he names his favorite toys]. You know, sir, we hang out together now." (Takis)

"We are a group, with the girls; I pretend to be a princess or the queen of the night." (Valado)

"I play games that the others suggest, and they play the games I suggest, we don't quarrel that much" (John)

- Pupils' initiatives for social interaction

"Yes, both John and me, we invite them to come to the special school, we ask them first, sir." (Takis)

"I ask them if they want to play together, we are friends." (Valado)

b. Peer acceptance

- Preference in team/ school activities

"Yes, I reach them and play with them; they look for me and they invite me." (Takis)

"We play in the schoolyard, we have many outdoor activities and we pretend to be princesses, it's just that the boys ruin our games." (Valado)

"[we play] football, or with the cards, or we play all together in the room of inclusion." (John)

- Social Rejection

"No, we all hang out together, they want me, sir, they want me." (Takis).

"Ehh... sometimes they call me stupid, it's my fault as well, I may ruin the game [laughing]" (John)

c. Personal Experiences- Assessment, Evaluation

"I want to go to the big school and play with Simon, to invite him home as well... to go out for a walk together." (Takis)

"It's... it's nice for us to be friends and be together, sir,... It's nice." (Valado)

"Later [he means during the next school year] I'll be bigger and we will all hang out together and no big kid will disturb us." (John)

5. Discussion

The content analysis of the textual data revealed some rather interesting findings. The present section develops in 2 sub-sections and attempts to evaluate, to interpret and correlate them with findings from previous research. The first subsection presents the

findings from the pre-intervention interviews and the second one discusses the findings from the post-intervention ones.

Phase A: Prior to the implementation of the social co-existence program

a. Social interactions with typically developing peers

Research indicates that stable and solid social interactions with peers are an important factor that predicts the social inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities both in the school setting and beyond (De Schauwer, Van Hove, Mortier & Loots, 2009). Furthermore, pupils with intellectual disabilities who do not participate in any form of inclusive practice seem to also face difficulties in being part of team games and collective activities. In most cases this concerns pupils who attend individualized educational settings, in which there is no other option than to interact with peers with similar disabilities. Since they don't have the chance to initiate social interaction, they settle on sporadic interactions that cover for their basic and immediate personal needs. However, if they ever take part in school-based activities, they restrict themselves to a rather passive role from which they soon withdraw (Bossart et al., 2013). As stated above the study's findings also reveal similar difficulties in the process of social interaction. At the same time, they highlight a rather passive societal role for pupils with intellectual disabilities. It is evident, therefore, that pupils with intellectual disabilities interact to a much lesser extent than their typically developing peers (Guralnick, 1999). According to Koster et al. (2009) the low rate of social participation and the many difficulties that pupils with intellectual disabilities face in the formation of their social relationships have various consequences, such as difficulties in the management of school's everyday life (e.g. aggressive behavior, high anxiety levels etc.) as well in issues regarding their future adjustment as adults.

More specifically, Koster et al. (2009) found that a) there is low peer acceptance for pupils with intellectual disabilities and variables such as 'kind of intellectual disability' do not seem impact on the level of acceptance, b) pupils with intellectual disabilities take less interaction initiatives and receive at the same time fewer invitations to interact. Since they do not participate in any peer group or social network, they seem to interact more with teachers. Inevitably, they gradually withdraw, and they get caught in paternalistic relations with teachers and other members of the school staff.

Nevertheless, the literature indicates that interacting with peers per se does not suffice to bring benefits for children with intellectual disabilities. If there isn't any organized intervention, typically developing children tend to interact with pupils who have the same abilities as them and not with pupils with intellectual disabilities (Terpstra & Tamura 2008). Furthermore, it seems that, when children choose their playmates, they usually take into account both the setting (e.g. the classroom, the school yard) as well as their peers' abilities (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). Therefore, whenever pupils are just let loose to an unstructured co-existence and communication setting (e.g. the school break, a team

game, etc.), the degree to which they develop positive attitudes and accept peers with intellectual disabilities remains low.

On the contrary, there is a different outcome when social interactions evolve according to a structured program, in which learning is collaborative and interaction through team projects and structured play strongly encouraged (Frosted & Pijl, 2007). Scheepstra, Nakken, & Pijl (1999) also stress the importance of joining a structured inclusive program which promotes each participant's initiatives, supports the notion of equal responsibilities and learning choices and does not favor sentiments of pity for intellectual disabilities. In addition, research indicates that co-operation and everyday co-existence, whether they pertain to pupils with or without intellectual disabilities, allow them to get emotionally involved and to develop various skills; negotiation, practice and repetition enable pupils to gradually solve their everyday school problems on their own (Carter, Cushing, Clark & Kennedy, 2005).

b. Peer acceptance

Peer acceptance is considered the most valid indicator for the social inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities in the school setting (Scheepstra Nakken, & Pijl, 1999). The study's findings demonstrate that pupils with mild intellectual disabilities are not welcome in team games and social activities both within and beyond the school setting. The analysis of the data also reveals that pupils from the general education school prefer and choose for playmates peers without some intellectual disability (see also Cook & Semmel, 1999).

Research shows that typically developing children are usually less inclined to develop more intimate interpersonal relationships with peers with intellectual disabilities, even though they realize the difficulties the latter face. More specifically, while they theoretically hold a positive attitude and declare their intent to socially interact with peers with intellectual disabilities, in fact -ever since school's first grades- they appear less willing to actively interact and develop mutual relationships and more keen on exhibiting an abstract social interest and adopting protective and patronizing behaviors towards them (Hall & Mc Gregor, 2000). It is, thus, suggested, that any expressed positive attitude reflects in effect the dominant model of disability, which promotes typical social relationships and favors a superficial acknowledgment of pupils with intellectual disabilities (Nikolarazi & De Reybekiel, 2001).

This study's findings support the notion that peer attitudes have a direct link with the emotional development of pupils with intellectual disabilities, their socialization and their general acceptance in the peer group (see also Gilmore & Farina 1989). Furthermore, negative peer attitudes are recognized as the main factor that leads to the social isolation of pupils with intellectual disabilities, a finding consistent with data from various longitudinal studies (Mc Dougall et al., 2004; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002). Conclusively, social stigma and possible peer rejection appear to have a negative impact on pupils with intellectual disabilities functionality level and self-efficacy (Nowicki, 2005).

Phase B: Post the implementation of the social co-existence program

a. Social interactions with typically developing peers

The study's findings indicate that pupils with mild intellectual disabilities have indeed the ability to improve their social skills, attend and actively participate in social activities with peers in the school setting. To begin with, it was evident that, post-intervention, these pupils were not holding anymore a passive role in their interactions with typically developing peers; on the contrary, they described themselves as more active and more capable of initiating social conduct with peers. Furthermore, their descriptions indicate that the newly emerged forms of social interaction led to the evolvement of more personal and more equal peer relationships and, consequently, to their social empowerment.

This change pre and post implementation is possibly linked to the opportunity given to pupils with intellectual disabilities to communicate and interact meaningfully with peers during the social co-existence program. Inclusive practices allow, indeed, all pupils to interact actively and consciously and develop more solid social relationships (D'Alonzo, Giordano & Vanleeuwen, 1997). Research also shows that inclusive practices in education offer pupils with intellectual disabilities the chance to develop their skills and gain various experiences, since they work and live along with peers who come from different social and/or economic backgrounds. An inclusive educational environment fosters the feeling of 'belonging', which in turn boosts future adjustment and development for pupils with intellectual disabilities. In addition, educational practices that place value to the social and emotional development of pupils with disabilities, allow them to express their feelings more genuinely and to empathize with their classmates in an easier, more authentic manner (Shapiro, 1999). In sum, pupils with intellectual disabilities seem to gain more social benefits in inclusive settings when compared to simply attending a special school, since there are so many more opportunities for social interaction that emerge in the general education school (Jones et al., 2002).

More specifically, in general education schools pupils with intellectual disabilities are not left alone as often, have more social contacts and, therefore, have the chance to develop more positive interpersonal relationships with their non-disabled peers. In an inclusive educational environment there are, thus, important gains for pupils with intellectual disabilities, such as the acquisition of social skills, the development of coherent social relationships and the cultivation of trust and solidarity. Various research findings support this assumption and state that an inclusive setting offers more opportunities to form interactional relationships with peers, to develop a sense of equally shared team membership and to shape a positive perception of the self (Koster, et al., 2010).

As a matter of fact, Okagaki, et al. (1998) report that social interaction within the school setting enables all the parties involved to better understand their peers' feelings. Through inclusive processes, each pupil –regardless of their social class background– gains essential experiences (experiential activities, collaborative learning, etc.), which serve as a basis for the development of skills that foster harmonic coexistence and

meaningful collaboration—both in the school setting and in later adult social life. In other words, the diverse environment of the general education schools boosts interaction and allows pupils to create personal relationships on their own, without a third party interference. This is a rather crucial fact, since it seems to determine to a large extent the socialization of pupils with intellectual disabilities (D'Alonzo, et al., 1997).

However, the above-mentioned benefits could only emerge if the school system encourages similar inclusive procedures that strengthen pupils' socio-emotional skills (Ainscow, 1997). Carrington (1999) strongly argues in favor of an inclusive school culture and notes that, if every child is treated as an individual capable of learning, then failure will no longer be attributed to person related factors; it will be understood as a difficulty of the school system to educate its pupils. He also stresses the importance of enabling and cultivating participation and interaction in settings in which each pupil can get involved without limits in every kind of interaction, while his/her previous experiences and achievements are taken seriously into account.

It is, therefore, evident that each school's philosophy and dominant climate dictate both the quantitative and the qualitative characteristics of interactions between pupils with and without disabilities. The prevailing communication framework in each school setting has a strong impact in the development of interpersonal relationships and social dynamics. Cultivation of relationships with peers with disabilities is possible only in those schools that endorse and promote the social dimension of inclusion. On the contrary, there can be no valid social interaction in schools in which pupils, with or without disabilities, just share the same space or in schools with a formal curriculum and everyday practices that segregate pupils on the basis of their academic achievements (Bunch & Valeo, 2004).

b. Peer acceptance

The study's participants strongly declared in their accounts that general school pupils held more positive attitudes and showed broader acceptance, after systematically participating in organized inclusive activities. This is a change possibly linked to a gradual realization and acceptance that each and every pupil is part of the same class, the same age group and the same school unit. Literature suggests that more personal contacts between pupils with and without disabilities are, indeed, linked to the development of positive attitudes towards intellectual disability (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002). Social inclusion within the general school setting gives every pupil with disabilities the opportunity to undertake a fuller, more active role in the school life, to become a notable unit and an inextricable member of the school community (Bossaert et al., 2013).

Moreover, social co-existence programs which encourage collaboration and communication seem to promote more equal and more authentic relations and to increase social support for pupils with disabilities. Besides, fostering an environment that enables valid co-existence in the general classroom can expedite the process of deconstructing negative stereotypes around intellectual disability.

Various research findings confirm the positive impact of social co-existence programs. Diamond and Carpenter (2000) state that elementary school pupils who took part in inclusive programs accepted to a greater extent their peers with intellectual disabilities compared to pupils who did not participate in similar interventions. Furthermore, Diamond (2001) notes that preschoolers and first-grade pupils from elementary school who socially interacted with peers with intellectual disabilities were more sensitive to others' feelings and more accepting towards their peers' difference when compared to pupils who interacted strictly with typically developing children. Longitudinal research by Favazza, Phillipson & Kumar (2000) revealed that pupils who showed higher levels of social interaction with peers with disabilities during preschool years developed longitudinally –until adolescence- some valid interactive experiences with them and gained a better insight into ways of helping and supporting them.

Manetti, Schneider & Siperstein (2001), implemented a co-existence program for typically developing pupils and pupils with intellectual disabilities and reported, as well, higher post implementation levels of acceptance for peers with disabilities. In fact, they argued that pupils' enjoyable contact during various structured games enhanced acceptance for peers with disabilities. On the other hand, they found that typically developing pupils, who did not participate in the co-existence program, seem to adopt a more ambiguous stance; even though they theoretically expressed their willingness to collaborate with peers with disabilities, in real life they were –according to their teachers' descriptions- indifferent and detached from them.

There seems to be, in other words, a controversy between declarations and everyday practice, a fact that supports the idea that real life positive experiences with pupils with disabilities can be an important predictive factor for nurturing their acceptance.

It is, however, worth noting that peer acceptance of pupils with special needs should not be linked to unilateral educational practices which favor specific behavioral techniques and repertoires. Similar practices are also used as interventions to non-disabled pupils and, in many cases, there are no pupils with disabilities involved. Interventions based purely on skills seem to be mostly more effective in modifying discrete social behaviors such as imitation, conversation turn-taking, reactive behaviors, etc. On the contrary, interventions that promote support appear to have an effective impact on broader aspects of all pupils' behaviors both within and beyond the school setting (eg. more social contacts, better quality of communication, endorsement of behaviors that promote peer social support etc.) (Carter, & Hughes, 2005).

In sum, the implementation of social co-existence programs seems to minimize beliefs that stir up the segregation of pupils with minor disabilities (Kalymon, Gettinger, & Hanley-Maxwell 2010), since it allows pupils with intellectual disabilities to interact more positively with peers and to show an improved attitude towards school and learning (Salend & Duhaney, 1999).

6. Conclusion

The study's findings stressed the importance of social co-existence programs for pupils with mild intellectual disabilities, mainly with respect to their socialization. More specifically, it was evident that -post-implementation- the participants from the special school were more active and participated equally in almost every age appropriate activity—to the point that their cognitive abilities allowed them. They also seemed more capable to specify their needs and familiarize with the school's collective processes. Moreover, they strongly expressed the belief that their co-participants accepted them - post implementation- as active members of the school community. It should be noted, however, that this attributed attitude of acceptance was not linked to enhanced or closer real life relationships and/or friendships between the two groups.

7. Restrictions and Suggestions for Further Research

These findings can add valuable input to the relevant literature and promote a better understanding of the socialization process for pupils with intellectual disabilities. Although there is a rich literature and research on the social interactions of pupils with intellectual disabilities and their acceptance by peers, these data derive mainly from the important adults (parents, teachers, etc.) or from peers and not from the pupils themselves. The present research project, however, focused solely on the experiences of pupils with intellectual disabilities.

There are, of course, methodological limitations with respect to the interpretation of the data. First and foremost, the small number of participants –they were pupils from just one school unit- does not permit the generalization of the results. Furthermore, the fact that there was just one other special school pupil who did not participate in the program did not allow for the formation of a control group, which would consist of special school pupils who did not participate in the co-existence program. A control group would help the researchers test whether the emerged changes were strictly due to systematic and increased contact between pupils with and without disabilities and better explore the possible role of the employed methodology and techniques of the particular social co-existence program.

In addition, another limitation was the inability to gather more longitudinal data, to conduct -in other words- a follow- up, compare new and old data and explore possible changes between them.

Concluding, it can be claimed that the research's results could add to the existing expertise and facilitate, possibly, the broader implementation of similar interventions mainly in the Greek educational system. It is strongly believed that similar programs, given that they are longitudinally implemented and evaluated, promote the psychological support of pupils with intellectual disabilities in the school and enhance the social dimension of inclusive education.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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SPECIAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUPILS WITH MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES
TALK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE FROM A SOCIAL CO-EXISTENCE PROGRAM

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