



CO-EDUCATION AND INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT TYPICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE GENERAL CLASSROOM. CONTRIBUTION OF PSYCHOMOTOR RHYTHMIC AND PSYCHOEMOTIONAL EDUCATION

Papadimitropoulou Panagoula¹,

Katsis Ilias²,

Zaragas Harilaos³,

Skordilis Emmanouil⁴ⁱ

¹PhD,

Science of Education,

Teaching Professor in Developmental Psychology,

School of Pedagogical and Technological Education,

Patra, Greece

²PhD Candidate, Researcher,

Laboratory of Special and Curative Education,

Pedagogical Department of Early Childhood Education

University of Ioannina,

Epirus, Greece

³Professor,

Department of Early Childhood Education,

University of Ioannina,

Epirus, Greece

⁴Professor,

Department of Physical Education and Sports Science,

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens,

Greece

Abstract:

The inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream schools has been one of the central issues in the field of education in recent years. The ever-increasing diagnosis of children with autism and modern pedagogical trends that promote the universal inclusion of all students, regardless of their abilities or difficulties, make the issue particularly topical. The purpose of this study is to explore the views and experiences of primary school teachers regarding the inclusion of students with ASD, to record their perceptions of its possibilities and benefits, but also to highlight the challenges they face. The research methodology was based on a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews; 20 teachers participated in the research, of which 14

ⁱCorrespondence: email yioulipapad@gmail.com, katsis.ilias2013@gmail.com, hzaragas@uoi.gr, eskord@phed.uoa.gr

from the general education sector and 6 from the special education sector, in schools in the Epirus region during the period 2024-2025. The research showed that teachers have basic knowledge about ASD and, in general, demonstrate a positive attitude towards inclusive education. However, they also recognize the difficulties that arise, such as the lack of systematic training, insufficient logistical support and limited time for collaboration between general and special education teachers. Despite the challenges, all recognized the benefits of inclusive education, especially in terms of the socialization of students with autism and the development of an inclusive culture in the school environment. The study concludes that continuous professional development of teachers, strengthening collaboration with families, and institutional support of schools are required, in order to cultivate an educational framework that promotes acceptance, equality and participation of all students without discrimination.

Keywords: autism, inclusion, inclusive education, primary education, teacher attitudes

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant effort to integrate people with special needs or disabilities into all areas of life, and of course, education could not fail to be one of the most important areas of implementation of this policy. In this context, schools are adopting new strategies, aiming to integrate students with learning difficulties and different needs with a common goal: inclusive education.

Inclusive education seeks the universal attendance of students in the same school context, regardless of language, religion, cultural background, color or special educational needs. The concept of "equal inclusive education" concerns the adaptation of the curriculum to meet the different needs (Ainscow, 2000). For the success of inclusive education, teachers play a decisive role, who are called upon to utilize strategies aimed at enhancing the learning and social development of children with autism (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000; Avissar *et al.*, 2003).

Regarding the Greek reality, some steps have already been taken in this direction, as legislative regulations recognize children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as students with special needs who require parallel support or an integration class (Imellou, 2011). Of course, the challenges faced by teachers are multiple, as the lack of specialization, resources and skills in terms of inclusion (Dias & Perez, 2013). Thus, the study of their attitudes becomes necessary, with the aim of better understanding the implementation of inclusive education.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of primary school teachers regarding the implementation and effectiveness of the inclusion of students with ASD in the context of general schools. The theoretical background refers to autism and its historical review, diagnostic criteria, etiology, characteristics of students with ASD, the concepts of inclusion, the education of students with ASD, teachers' views,

as well as the cooperation of general and special education teachers. The research carried out focuses on the methodology, data and results regarding knowledge about autism, experiences from inclusive education, the relationship between autism and inclusive education, socialization and attitudes towards the children's families. The study concludes with a discussion of findings, research limitations and suggestions for potential future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Autism- Historical Review

ASD and autism are neurodevelopmental disorders that involve deficits in social behavior and communication. It is a chronic developmental condition that affects the way the brain processes stimuli and requires systematic intervention (Mourelatou & Tsitlakidou, 2012; Grandin & Scariano, 1995). According to the DSM-IV-TR, ASD includes autistic disorder, Asperger syndrome, childhood disorganization disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, and Rett disorder (Phetrasuwan *et al.*, 2009).

ASD includes two main categories of difficulties: difficulties in social interaction and repetitive behaviors/few interests. Autistic disorder is the most severe disorder, while Asperger syndrome is presented as milder (Heward, 2011). Then, autistic children cannot easily manage eye contact, understand social behaviors and express interests (Mesibov, *et al.*, 1997). They present significant problems in communication, especially with the repetition of words or phrases (Mavropoulou, 2007). The appearance of repetitive behaviors, adherence to routines and obsession with certain objects are their main characteristics (Frith, 1999).

The term "autism" was first introduced in 1911 by E. Bleuler, attributing the isolation of the individual to himself (Mattila *et al.*, 2013). In 1943, L. Kanner described "early childhood autism" through the observation of difficulties in social interaction in a group of children. At the same time, H. Asperger described children with normal levels of intelligence, but difficulties in social skills, establishing Asperger syndrome. Then, U. Frith translated Asperger's work into English, while L. Wing was the first to use the term "Asperger syndrome", emphasizing the three main deficits: social interaction, communication and imagination (Lennard-Brown, 2004).

2.2 Diagnostic Criteria

The basic diagnostic tools are the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the ICD (World Health Organization, 1992). In DSM-IV, diagnosis is made before the age of three, with the criteria set as criteria deficits in social interaction, restricted interests and difficulties in communication. According to DSM-5 (2013), the term "ASD" was established with two basic elements: a) significant difficulties in communication and b) repetitive stereotypical behaviors (Kim *et al.*, 2014). ICD-10 (1992) describes similar

criteria, but emphasizes social interaction and repetitive behaviors before the age of three, without reference to sensory difficulties.

Early diagnosis becomes crucial, as parents adapt more easily to new data and seek better interventions (Woolley *et al.*, 1989). It is clear that diagnosis is not simply aimed at nomenclature, but primarily about a substantive understanding of children's needs and the implications of their difficulties. Through valid interventions, children can strengthen their social skills and improve their lives, following a consistent therapeutic approach program.

2.3 Rationale

The exact causes of autism remain unknown, as research has not led to any definitive conclusions. Its etiology remains a subject of ongoing investigation, with various interpretations being expressed (Fett-Conteet *et al.*, 2015; Hill & Frith, 2003). Of course, they are not attributed to intra-family relationships, stress or the personality of the parents, while it is often considered a functional disorder rather than an organic one.

The onset of autism is observed during the 30 months of life with a frequency of 1:10.000.000 births, at 1:1.000 when other syndromes coexist. Autism occurs more often in boys, but girls present more severe symptoms. The etiology is attributed to organic, genetic and environmental factors, such as metabolic disorders, biochemical abnormalities of neurotransmitters, reduced cerebral perfusion, viral infections, dysfunctions in encephalitis, chromosomal atypia, immunological dysfunctions and enzyme deficiency (Katsougri, 2014). Also, heredity is important, since siblings of autistic individuals have a probability (3%) of showing symptoms (Kaliva, 2005).

2.4 Characteristics of Students with ASD

Individuals with ASD present multiple characteristics that vary by age and by individual (Lord *et al.*, 2015). The most common characteristics include difficulties with eye contact and visual control, problems with imitation and motor coordination. They also react unusually to sensory stimuli, have peculiar physical development, and have special abilities, such as in the areas of mathematics and music. (Kakouros&Maniadaki, 2006).

Regarding communication, language development is delayed, verbal and non-verbal communication is not easily understood, and echolalia is often present (Papakonstantinou, 2001).

Regarding social interaction, children with ASD encounter difficulties in forming relationships, recognizing and expressing emotions, exhibit tendencies towards loneliness and isolation, as well as deficits in "Theory of Mind" (Lennard-Brown, 2004; Notas, 2005; Hill & Frith, 2003).

Regarding stereotypical behaviors, these individuals are particularly persistent in their attachment to routines, objects, and repetitive movements. Furthermore, their reaction to changes is very intense. Often, these behaviors take on the role of a stress management mechanism (Wing, 1996; Mavropoulou, 2011; Klinger & Dawson, 1995).

2.5 Inclusion – Co-education

The concept of "inclusion" was presented in the Salamanca Declaration (1994) as a continuation of "integration", promoting schools that are open to all (Avramidis, 2013). According to Zoniou-Sideri (2010), the term "inclusive education" refers to an education without exclusions. According to UNESCO (2005), inclusion aims for a quality education, which recognizes the special abilities of students and reduces stereotypes. It is firmly based on collaborative teaching and provides support services (Stuart *et al.*, 2007; Soto-Chodiman *et al.*, 2012).

Inclusive education requires a total transformation of the school unit so that it is able to respond to the universal needs of students, without categorizations (Hatzisotiriou&Xenofontos, 2014). The main goal is acceptance, participation and equality at an educational, emotional and social level (Chung *et al.*, 2015; Mourelato & Tsitlakidou, 2012).

In order to achieve inclusive education properly, the necessary conditions are appropriate personnel, collaborative teaching, parental participation, individual goal setting, flexibility of the curriculum, and social support are necessary conditions (Gibb *et al.*, 2007; Dawson & Osterling, 1997). The role of teachers is primary and, for this reason, continuous training and provision of the appropriate logistical infrastructure are required (Desimone *et al.*, 2013; Soulis, 2002). Then, cooperation with families is equally important because it contributes to correct decision-making and support for children (Ferguson, 2008).

However, the above process is hampered by inadequate training, lack of equipment, large classes and different perceptions on the part of teachers (Roberts, 2007; Vlachou, 2007). Furthermore, difficulties in interaction between students may lead to isolation and, therefore, intervention and cooperation of parents and teachers is required (Mavropoulou, 2007).

The benefits of inclusive education are multiple, and it benefits all students, academically and socially. On a social level, they develop communication skills, form relationships and feel they are part of something (Hunt *et al.*, 2003). School, bullying and stereotypes are reduced, while empathy and respect are cultivated (Fisher *et al.*, 2000). On an emotional level, children's self-esteem is improved, and support is provided to their families (Kappen, 2010). In the context of the state, it also benefits if one considers that the potential cost of separate school units is reduced.

2.6 Teachers' Views & Attitudes

Teachers' attitudes play an important role in the successful inclusion of students with ASD, as they are linked to their personal attitudes, values and professional readiness (Soulis, 2002; McGregor & Campbell, 2001). Their attitudes are significantly influenced by their self-confidence, collaboration with colleagues, experience with people with disabilities, age and educational level (Kalyva *et al.*, 2007; Wilkerson, 2012).

Many studies reveal positive attitudes on the part of teachers, as some support inclusive education, in cases where they have been properly trained or have experiential experience (Yuen & Westwood, 2001; Wilkerson, 2012; Cassimos *et al.*, 2013). However, other studies have revealed cautious or negative attitudes due to anxiety, lack of preparation, difficulties in teaching and mental exhaustion (Chung *et al.*, 2015; Hayes, 2014; Segall, 2003).

Overall, although most teachers are positively disposed towards inclusion, concerns remain regarding the adequacy or lack of training and their readiness to meet the demands of inclusion and differentiated teaching. The ultimate success of such training depends significantly on the perceptions and attitudes of teachers (Mavropoulou & Padelidou, 2000).

2.7 Collaboration of General & Special Education Teachers

Teachers are the key actors of inclusion, and their collaboration is important for their success (Wilkerson, 2012; Avramidi *et al.*, 2000). Co-teaching began in 1960 in the USA and is based on mutual planning and teaching by a general education teacher and a special education teacher with the aim of providing equal opportunities to all and meeting needs (Stuart *et al.*, 2007).

Successful collaboration requires mutual respect for roles, acceptance, communication and sharing of experiences (Strgilo *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, collaboration is enhanced with the help of models, such as The Autism Spectrum Disorder Inclusion Collaboration Model, which relies on the participation of other professionals, such as social workers or speech therapists (Simpson *et al.*, 2003).

The main obstacles often cited are role ambiguity, potential conflicts and reticence (Zoniou-Sideri, 2011). However, research shows that teacher collaboration boosts students' self-confidence and enhances learning (Fris, 2004; Gately & Gately, 2001). Of course, there are negative examples where a tendency towards isolation of general education teachers or difficulties in coexistence have been observed (Glashan *et al.*, 2004; Strogilos *et al.*, 2015).

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The research design was organized with the aim of highlighting the level of knowledge, capturing lived experiences, exploring attitudes and perceptions, in order to draw useful conclusions for educational practice and the implementation of inclusive education policies.

Qualitative research was chosen to conduct the study, as it shows teachers' attitudes and perceptions to be explored and personal experiences to be recorded, providing flexibility and depth and allowing modifications at any time during the research process (Iosifidis, 2003).

3.2 Research Tools

The semi-structured interview was chosen as a data collection tool, as it is one of the most appropriate methods for recording personal attitudes and experiences. The interview requires personal contact between the researcher and the participant, allowing for the exploration and the understanding of the subjective attitudes, thoughts and feelings of the teachers. It offers flexibility and creates a direct and familiar environment, facilitating meaningful communication.

Before the main interview, two pilot interviews were conducted to check the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. Based on their results, some adjustments were made, aiming to improve the flow of the questions and answers. Ultimately, the interviews were organized around five main sections: a) teachers' knowledge about autism, b) teachers' knowledge and experiences about inclusive education, c) inclusive education and autism, d) socialization and autism, and e) teachers' views on the needs and behaviors of families of autistic children.

The interviews were conducted during the months of October and November 2022, after consultation with participants. They were conducted either remotely or in person, lasted approximately 30 minutes and were based on 12 non-directive questions.

3.3 Sample

The sample of this study included 20 teachers (fourteen from the general education sector and six from the special education sector) from schools in the region of Epirus during the period 2024-2025. Their age ranged from 27 to 45 years, while their average experience was 8.2 years. Of these, fourteen belonged to general education and seven to special education. More specifically, the eight general education teachers had a student with autism in their class, the six general education teachers worked as parallel support, and six special education teachers had undertaken parallel support for a student with autism. All of them worked in four kindergartens and four primary schools during the school year 2024-2025.

The sample was selected through purposive sampling, as this method is considered necessary when goal setting is based on the in-depth study of specific characteristics. The participation of teachers was based on their availability and willingness to take part, while a common element of all was their previous experience with autistic students.

3.4 Ethical Issues

The process placed significant emphasis on the ethical dimension of the research, as participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and gave their consent, while anonymity and the protection of personal data were ensured. Participants were informed about the use of a tape recorder and the destruction of the material after the completion of the research.

3.5 Data Analysis Method

The data analysis was carried out using Thematic Analysis (Brown & Clark, 2006), as it is considered appropriate for qualitative approaches. Initially, the interviews were transcribed, and their main points were identified, in order to draw the main conclusion.

The process followed six stages of thematic analysis:

- 1) careful reading of interviews and recognition of patterns,
- 2) definition of codes corresponding to certain data,
- 3) examining new issues arising from the data,
- 4) confirmation/rejection of issues or their possible merging,
- 5) name and number of topics and subtopics,
- 6) commenting on answers and linking them to the purpose of the survey.

The coding of participants was carried out based on their gender, type of education and role.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The results of the research are presented based on the thematic units that were investigated.

4.1.1 Teachers' Knowledge About Autism

Newer teachers refer to this term as "ASD", while more experienced teachers refer to this term as "autism". The characteristics they highlight are related to difficulties in communication, sociability and interactions, stereotypical behaviors, emotional and perceptual disparities. Special education teachers combine knowledge and experience, whereas general education teachers rely mainly on their practical experience. Also, teachers observe an increase in diagnoses in recent years and with greater frequency in boys (ratio 1:4, girls-boys). Regarding the etiology of occurrence, they themselves point out biological, genetic and environmental factors.

4.1.2 Teachers' Knowledge and Experiences About Inclusive Education

All teachers supported inclusion and acknowledged that better infrastructure and support are needed. They agreed that children with mild autism can be integrated into the general classroom, while children with severe autism are better off in special schools. They suggested the involvement of special educators, psychologists, social workers and art teachers. There is also a need for ongoing specialization in autism issues for general and special education teachers.

4.1.3 Inclusive Education and Autism

Aggression, denial, communication deficits, and emotional changes have been observed in students with ASD. Successful inclusion requires good collaboration between teachers and family involvement.

4.1.4 Socialization and Autism

Inclusive education enhances socialization, typical children benefit from their contact with diversity, and the teacher must prevent incidents of isolation of children with ASD.

4.1.5 Teachers' Views on the Needs and Behaviors of Families of Autistic Children

The family either accepts the disability and wishes to cooperate or finds it difficult and makes the process difficult. They need support from specialists with the difficulties, and general schools are usually preferred, but when their child's case does not allow it, they resort to special schools.

4.1.6 Reliability Analysis

In qualitative research, reliability can be affected by the lack of standardization and subjectivity on the part of the researcher; this is why the contribution of an external evaluator is considered necessary. Regarding validity, semi-structured interviews cannot be reproduced under identical conditions, which makes recording necessary. Finally, validity was strengthened through the control of the interview guide by the supervising professor.

5. Discussion

The research revealed significant similarities and differences in teachers' perceptions of the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream schools. Participants identified key characteristics of the disorder, such as social isolation and communication difficulties, while special educators seemed to be characterized by a more specialized discourse compared to generalists. At the same time, causal factors remained unclear, with references to genetic, environmental and social.

Regarding the attitude towards inclusion, most teachers seemed positive and recognized the benefits. However, concerns were expressed regarding the shortcomings of the organization, curricula and logistical infrastructure. Significant importance was given to the need for continuous training of teachers, so that they can respond to the needs of inclusive education.

The collaboration between general and special education teachers emerged as a decisive factor for success. Experience showed that co-teaching and the exchange of practices led to desired results. Correspondingly, the attitude of typically developing children and families was considered crucial. Awareness and information were proposed as the main conditions for the acceptance of diversity. In addition, emphasis was placed

on the need for state care for permanent funding, as the absence of structures was linked to the weakness of schools.

Finally, the socialization of autistic children was inextricably linked to inclusive education, because children cooperate and their self-esteem and development of their social skills are promoted. The importance of cooperation with families was also highlighted, both in terms of school choice and in the child's daily progress.

6. Recommendations

The main difficulty of this study is to find an appropriate sample, responding to the purpose and research questions. In addition, the selection of the sample focused on general education teachers, general education teachers working as parallel support and special education teachers as parallel support in general schools. Finally, a limitation was the lack of opinions of principals, who are the heads of school units.

Future research would be useful to expand the sample through random sampling and to include all those involved in the educational process. At the same time, it is suggested to investigate the influence of factors such as gender, age, educational level and teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Finally, a mixed methodological approach is considered useful, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, with the aim of enhancing the validity and reliability of the results.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Papadimitropoulou Panagoula (PhD), Science of Education, Teaching Professor in Developmental Psychology, School of Pedagogical and Technological Education, Patra, Greece.

Email: yioulipapad@gmail.com

Katsis Ilias, PhD Candidate, Researcher, Laboratory of Special and Curative Education, Pedagogical Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Ioannina, Epirus, Greece.

Email: katsis.ilias2013@gmail.com

Zaragas Harilaos, Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Ioannina, Epirus, Greece.

Email: hzaragas@uoi.gr

Skordilis Emmanouil, Professor, Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

Email: eskord@phed.uoa.gr

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