



STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN GREEK EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. POLICIES AND OBSTACLES

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to focus on Greek secondary education teachers' views regarding students with intellectual disabilities, their inclusion in the formal education system and the dimensions of social and educational exclusion, which may be related to it. The survey participants were 240 secondary school teachers who answered a questionnaire, while 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same group of participants. The results of the research highlight the need for the professional development of Greek secondary education teachers in matters of special education and the immediate extension and upgrading of inclusive education structures.

Keywords: secondary education, intellectual disabilities, inclusive education

1. Introduction

The international records on intellectual disabilities indicate that about 2-3% of the general population has an IQ of less than two standard deviations below average (Werner et al., 2019). In Greece during the 2009-2010 school year, 9272 students with intellectual disabilities were registered in special education, while there are not enough official data on intellectual disabilities in the general population, which makes it difficult to assess the situation in Greece (Anagnostopoulos, & Soumaki, 2011).

According to the American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2018), intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in the intellectual function and adaptive behavior of the individual in the environment and is associated with difficulties in cognitive, social and practical skills before the age of 18. At the same time, since the past decade, the term intellectual

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disability has been used instead of the medical term “*mental retardation*”, emphasizing the interaction of the individual with the environment and the adaptability of the person to their difficulties (Schroeder et al., 2002). The term intellectual disability facilitates more contemporary school and professional practices that focus on the individual's functional behaviour and environmental mediating factors, placing support for the individual in a socio-ecological context. In addition, this term is less unpleasant or offensive to disabled people and is compatible with international terminology. In recent years, the term “*learning disability*” has also been used to cover a wide range of learning difficulties, since it includes students with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties (Siegel, 2018).

The earlier definitions of disability were based on the conceptual and epistemological framework of the medical model, which presents disability as a representation of a given objective reality, articulated with the authority of the conceptualisations of the 'many' and 'normal' (non-disabled) as the axis of reference. In the context of the medical model, individual differences are transformed into cultural and social deficiencies and at the same time, they are ideologised, reproducing structures and practices of domination and manipulation of the social reality of the disabled person. The World Health Organization in its newer definitions, however, in the face of this positive-causing approach to disability, introduced the social model of disability and emphasized that material limitations and social barriers prevent the social inclusion of the disabled person (Oliver, 1990). In the field of the social model, intellectual disabilities are perceived as a social construct, providing an alternative way of approaching disabled social interaction and co-existence (Rapley, 2004). According to the social model, the exclusion of disabled people from participating in social activities is not the result of their organic dysfunction, but rather an outcome of the functioning of social and environmental structures, as well as the dominant negative social representations towards disability itself (Barnes, & Sheldon, 2010).

2. Education policy in Greece for students with intellectual disabilities

Until the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Special Education in Greece was fragmentary and the effort for social welfare was carried out by the state, the church and private initiatives (asylums and institutions) (Giavrimis, 2018). The Greek state has dealt with a disability on a case-by-case basis, legislating the establishment of schools for specific disabilities only. Thus, by Law 4397/1929 (Government Gazette 309/A/24-08-1929) provided for the establishment of schools for the education of children with intellectual disabilities (“*Primary school for mentally disabled children.....*”), while in 1937, by Law 453, the establishment of the first special school in Athens was institutionalized (Kalantzis, 1984; Stasinou, 1991). At the same time, the differentiation between socially constructed 'normality' and 'divergence', 'delay', 'anomaly', as defined by disability in the social and legislative discourse, at that time, is vertical. A typical example is the proposal of the education committee of the educational policy of the dictatorship to introduce special education for people with “.....*mental retardation*,...

physical disability or inability to adapt to school and social adjustment" (Andreou, 1999). This approach to special education in state education policy continued until the 1970s and 1980s.

In September 1971, the Ministry announced the establishment of 40 special school units for children with *"mental retardation"* throughout Greece. By Law 1222/72 (Government Gazette 153/31.8.72), is institutionalized the creation of a Selective Special School for students with intellectual disabilities in the Marasleio Didaskaleio ("*...and a four-class special school for retarded children ...*") and, also, 17 Special Primary Schools are established for the education of *"mentally retarded children"*. The first general law on special education was passed in 1981 (Law 1143/1981/ Government Gazette 80/A/31-3-1981) and from the beginning of the 20th century, special education was entered into a more organised framework. Thus, in 2000, Law 2817 introduced several innovations in special education, as well as the integration of disabled people into formal schooling. In addition, in 2004 detailed curricula were prepared by the Pedagogical Institute for six (6) categories of pupils with special educational needs, one of which was those with *"mild"* *"moderate"* *"severe"* mental *"retardation"*.

The last general law on special education (Law 3699/2008/ Government Gazette 199/A/2.10.2008) came to cover the shortcomings of the national educational policy for the education of people with disabilities and prepares society itself for the necessity of accepting people so that they can integrate smoothly and contribute with their active social participation. For this reason, the State is committed to providing access to educational services and social resources by creating appropriate building infrastructure and fulfilling its obligations in the European "Design for all" programme. However, the educational policy in place is usually characterised by fragmentation, ambivalence and in many cases timidity to legislate or implement in educational practice the rights established in the legal framework for equal education of disabled people. The Greek Ombudsman (2015) about Special Education and Training points out that the problems identified are related to serious understaffing, insufficient educational support for students with disabilities and inadequate material and technical infrastructure. The Greek Ombudsman (2015) on the situation of Special Education and Education points out that the problems identified are related to serious understaffing, insufficient educational support for students with disabilities and inadequate material and technical infrastructure. These factors exacerbate social inequalities, stigmatisation, marginalisation and social class differences, as well as the naturalisation of the social characteristics of people with disabilities

3. Teachers' attitudes towards intellectual disabilities and inclusive education

Inclusive education is an educational reform against failure and social and educational exclusion (Slee, 2011). According to Booth and Ainscow (2011), inclusive education: (a) includes support for each person, so they feel like they belong in the educational community (b) contributes to reducing exclusion, discrimination and barriers to learning;

(c) promotes social justice, solidarity and respect for uniqueness (Ballard, 1997). Inclusive education is a political and cultural change, a deconstruction of the conservative reality of the different contexts of education (general-specific) and their unification into a field of equality, social justice, solidarity and respect for diversity (Ballard, 1997). Inclusive education suggests the need for a radical reconstruction of the system of educational policy and reorganization of curriculum and teaching pedagogy (Skidmore, 2004).

In this context, the teachers' attitudes toward formal education act as agents of school mediation and can support or undo procedures to strengthen social inclusion with disabled people, as well as their right to an education for all. The results of international surveys show that teachers are primarily positive about the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities into the formal education system (Memisevic, & Hodzic 2011; Ojok, & Wormnæs, 2013), whether they work in Special Education and Education, or in formal education, with the former being more positive (Balboni, & Pedrabissi, 2000). In expressing a more positive attitude, however, teachers refer to the important role of the type of disability and its severity, their educational experience (Balboni, & Pedrabissi, 2000), information and appropriate training (basic or in-service) (Balboni, & Pedrabissi, 2000; Ojok, & Wormnæs, 2013) and their confidence in their skills (Alshemari, 2016). Malki and Einat (2018) report that the inclusive education of students with intellectual disabilities, as supported by Israeli teachers, fails, mainly, due to the inadequacy of the school curriculum and the limited skills of teachers, factors that push teachers to use "*informal*" inclusion strategies. Thus, they suggest increasing the number of teaching hours, improving the teachers' curriculum and developing cooperation between formal education teachers, special education teachers and experts in the field of inclusive education. In addition, teachers in a survey conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina suggest that: a) additional support should be given to formal education teachers by the school administration for the successful implementation of the inclusive education process; b) support should be provided by special education teachers for the development of individualised programmes for children with intellectual disabilities; c) appropriate teaching materials should be developed; and d) the number of pupils in formal classes should be reduced (Memisevic and Hodzic, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to research the view of Greek secondary school teachers on students with intellectual disabilities and their inclusive education.

4. Material and Methods

4.1 Participants

This research explores the views of Greek secondary school teachers because most of them have not been taught either in their basic education or in-service training the necessary amount of cognitive subjects to deal with the difficulties of students with disabilities, compared to primary school teachers (Giavrimis, 2018).

In the survey, we followed the method of triangulation. A questionnaire for quantitative research and a semi-structured interview guide for qualitative research was

constructed. Regarding the quantitative survey, the survey participants were 240 Greek secondary school teachers. 135 (56.3%) of participants were men and 105 (43.89%) were women. 21 of the teachers (8.8%) were under thirty years old, 81 (33.8%) were between 30-40 years old, 114 teachers (47.5%) were aged between 41-50 years old and 24 (10%) were between 51-60 years old. In addition, 204 teachers (85%) were permanent, 24 (10%) were substituted and 12 (5%) were hourly contracted.

The qualitative survey involved 16 women and 9 male teachers. We selected the individuals based on their knowledge they had and the communicative ability to provide in-depth responses to the topic under discussion (Tsiolis, 2011). The aim was not to find a large and random number of participants, but the individuals, who were familiar with and had adequate knowledge about our topic and the necessary information. The participants were also assured that their personal data were protected so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and the recording permission of the interview was secured. Then, the teachers' discourse was transcribed and analyzed. The validity and effectiveness of categorization were ensured through the application of the rules of objectivity, exhaustiveness, appropriateness and mutual exclusion.

4.2 Research tools

A questionnaire for quantitative research and a semi-structured interview guide for qualitative research was constructed based on the theoretical models for disability (Booth and Ainscow, 2011; Slee, 2011; Zoniou-Sideri, & Vlachou, 2006), the globalised framework of education, as well as the organisation of the welfare state and the situation of special education in Greece (Stasinou, 1999; Chronopoulou-Pantazi, 2011).

The main thematic axes of tool for quantitative research are: (a) The first included questions relating to the education and training of teachers, (b) the second question concerning teachers' attitudes towards students with intellectual disabilities; (c) the third concerned questions relating to the inclusive education of children with intellectual disabilities, (d) the fourth section included questions relating to teachers' views for students with intellectual disabilities and (e) the last section of the questionnaire referred to key demographic characteristics (gender, age, staff status, etc.). The questionnaire participants' replies were given if by means of a four- or five-stage Likert scale. Before its application, the questionnaire had been evaluated by five special education teachers, who evaluated the questions of the scale in terms of the relevance of their content to inclusive education of students with intellectual disabilities on a five-point scale (where 1 = unrelated and 5 = absolutely relevant). The scale evaluation (with the questions = 4.8) was adequate. Also, the internal consistency reliability factor of the questionnaire was 0.78 and the split-half reliability was 0.74.

At the same time, the qualitative research was conducted using the semi-structured interview method. The constructed interview guide included questions related to: a) the conceptualization of disability, b) educational policies for inclusive education, c) teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in the "formal" educational system, d) barriers and difficulties of inclusive

education and e) the attitudes of other members of the educational community (students, parents). Our effort with qualitative research was through the word of the subjects to form categories and subcategories, so that, in a dialectical way, we would be deeply involved in the transformation of reality through the meanings of individuals and their perceptions of social reality (Tsiolis, 2011).

5. Results

5.1 Inclusive education

a. Attitudes of teachers

Teachers according to the findings of the quantitative survey: a) waver in relation to the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities into the formal education system (Mean: 3.57, Median: 4.00, SD: 0.756/1=I disagree to 4=I agree), although it appears that most would probably feel guilty if they did not accept in their school class a student with an intellectual disability (Mean: 1.62, Median: 1.00, SD: 0.987/1=I disagree to 4=I agree) and b) there is a percentage of around 25% of teachers who disagree most strongly with an accession policy for students with intellectual disabilities.

In addition, the inclusion of a person with an intellectual disability is characterized by teachers in 24% of their responses as good, 23.6% as moral and 22.4% as useful. It is characterized as an intelligent action in 13.4% of teachers' responses and in 6% of teachers' responses is referred to as pleasant and fine, while in contrast to a small percentage of teachers' responses to inclusion of a person with an intellectual disability, ranging between 0.3% and 1.9%, is characterized as something bad or as silly or as useless and above all as unpleasant.

The above is also highlighted through the speech of the interviewed teachers. Teachers seem not to have a firm view of their interaction with students with intellectual disabilities and their inclusion in their classrooms. Views range from positive and democratic, to negative and confrontational:

"The school class should be an environment that accepts everyone and that is what we need to project."

"I find mental retardation more difficult than any other physical disability, uh, because the person has a real problem communicating and understanding what is taught....."

At the same time, they also stress the importance of education policy and administrative guidelines:

"I think it is not my personal element and my personal choice which child I will put in my school class or not, that is, it is not up to me to choose, and it is also very bad to choose which children will enter our school class and which will not."

b. Educational exclusion

Most teachers in our survey, when asked whether some students with disabilities are excluded or do not have access to education, responded that less than half of students with intellectual disabilities experience such a situation. More specifically, 80 (33.3%) teachers responded that it is only a few students with intellectual disabilities who are excluded or do not have a role in education, 133 (55.4%) teachers said that there are several students with intellectual disabilities who are excluded but they are less than half of their population, while 27 (11.3%) teachers reported that students with intellectual disabilities who are excluded or do not have a role in education are more than half of their population. The severity of the intellectual disability seems to play a key role here:

"It depends on the situation. People with physical disabilities, for example, can clearly be integrated.... or mental retardation and so on want their own environment, in which they can most effectively be integrated. That is, inclusive education..... students with intellectual disabilities, I repeat, is difficult. They want their own space, their own integration process."

c. Awareness-raising actions

In relation to sensitization actions available to teachers, it appears that they would encourage students in their school class to have friendly relations with a child with an intellectual disability (Mean:3.69, Median:4.00, SD:0.539/ 1=No to 4=Yes), they would probably allow a child with an intellectual disability from their city's special school to play in the courtyard with the children of their school class (Mean: 3.34, Median: 3.00, SD: 0.613/1=No to 4=Yes), would allow a child in their school class to help a child with an intellectual disability in lessons (Mean: 3.0 62, Median: 4.00, SD: 0.717/1=No to 4=Yes) and would visit with their school class a special school/institution to meet children with intellectual disabilities (Mean: 3.75, Median: 4.00, SD: 0.560/1=No to 4=Yes). We can mention that most of the teachers in our sample are favourably disposed towards students with intellectual disabilities. They are willing to carry out various actions so that, the interaction of their students with these people is as close as possible, but at the same time, there is a percentage of teachers who oppose the inclusion and inclusion policies.

d. Parents of typical students

The teachers of our research probably agree that students with intellectual disabilities have difficulty within the education system due to discrimination and prejudice (Mean: 4.16, Median: 4.00, SD: 0.901/1=Not at all up to 5=Too much), while the interviewed teachers referred to the negative behavior of some parents:

"..... typical pupils reproduce the fear of certain parents. Some parents are even the first to react because of fear and ignorance....."

"..... quite often parents have negative stance towards such a child because they think they their children's education will lag behind."

but also, the importance of the family for the attitude of non-disabled pupils:

"Here, of course, we also cannot talk about a rule - that it is always so. There are children, who have both from home and from school, have become aware of these children, are very receptive to the uniqueness and we can say that most times they "embrace" children with diversity."

4.2. Education policy for inclusive education

a. Material and technical infrastructure

Teachers highlight the deficiencies and problems inherent in the educational system regarding the issues of infrastructure, organisation, curricula and contemporary teaching that make it difficult for students with intellectual disabilities to be included in the formal educational system:

"Certainly, often there are no infrastructures....."

"The education system does not provide equal opportunities to everyone I believe and at the moment it is making some improvement efforts but in a large part I think it has serious shortcomings..... for example, the analytical programmes, the way the school operates, the infrastructure,..... the state should take more care".

b. Information and training policies for state bodies

Teachers refer to the inadequacies of state services regarding the information on the inclusion of disabled students (Mean: 4.00, Median: 4.00, SD: 0.826/1=Not at all up to 5=Too much) and stress that the different institutions should inform society more about the abilities of students with intellectual disabilities (Mean: 3.86, Median: 4.00, SD: 0.411/1=No to 4=Yes). More than 90% of the teachers find that their knowledge and training about special education and students with disabilities are significantly lacking. Following on from the above regarding the education, and training provided by the Ministry of Education, 77.4% of teachers respond that they have not attended any programme in the last five years, relating to students with disabilities. Also, 25% of teachers report that their sources of information on disability and inclusion issues are from School Counsellors, 24% report that they receive information from non-institutionalized networks, such as specialized teachers, 2% of teachers from trade unions, 41% of teachers receive information from bodies that are not part of the education system, such as associations of persons with disabilities, the media, non-governmental organizations. A significant percentage of teachers (8%) get information from the web.

Although teachers believe that information on intellectual disability issues from various sources has improved in recent years, they state that there are still problems of

accessibility to valid information for the majority of the population, which creates attitudes of caution, fear, regret and denial.

"In recent years, of course, this situation has been changing slowly, parents are being informed and they know that students must also....."

"No, it's hard for everyone..... there is no proper information, both to parents and teachers but also to our wider society. We have a difficult society that cannot accept the different."

"The world, because of the lack of information, treats them with caution."

"I would say that more lack of information and not different culture as it seems."

Finally, the interviewed teachers consider their training and education an important issue for the inclusion and inclusive education of students with intellectual disabilities. Its non-existence is an obstacle and a factor that creates fears and insecurities among teachers:

"..... and of course it is also the non-information, proper training of general education teachers on special education issues resulting in these children..... still be targeted and have a sign"

"As I have said, I consider that the training of general education teachers is incomplete and I believe that there should be continuous and compulsory training".

5. Discussions

The purpose of this study was to focus on Greek secondary education teachers' views regarding students with intellectual disabilities, their inclusion in the formal education system and the dimensions of social and educational exclusion, which may be related to it. The findings show that the teachers waver in relation to the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities, although most would probably feel guilty if they did not accept a student with an intellectual disability in their class. Moreover, teachers of our research are willing to make various awareness-raising actions together with their students, so, that, their approach to these individuals is as close as possible. There is, however, a percentage of teachers, who disagree strongly with the inclusion policy for students with intellectual disabilities. Their disagreement is based on the difficulty of dealing with the severity of the intellectual disability, the inadequacy of the availability of the appropriate material and technical infrastructure, but also the lack of education and training. Indicative is that about nine-tenths of the teachers in our sample have not been taught any subject related to students with intellectual disabilities and their inclusive education.

These findings are in line with research data in the international and Greek literature (Fyssa et al., 2014; Genova, 2015; Zoniou-Sideri, 2006) and confirm both the inadequacy of Greek education system to include these students in a more functional way in society, and the inability of teachers due to their inadequate training to support their learning needs (Mavropalias, & Anastasiou, 2016). This is also contributed by the separation of teachers into specialists and non-specialists, expressed several times in the public discourse, it brings out the fear and insecurity of the latter for the sufficiency of learning support for students with disabilities in the context of inclusive education (Slee, 2003).

In addition, our research participants highlight the lack of specific infrastructure and government services for information and inclusion. The shortcomings in their administrative and organisational structure and the confusion in the implementation of education policy further exacerbate the existing problems (The Greek Ombudsman, 2015; Lampropoulou, & Panteliadou, 2000). In an educational policy, where important issues concerning inclusive education (e.g. material and technical infrastructure, teacher training) are not taken into account, it is logical that the pedagogical and teaching practices that are followed and the attitudes of teachers in formal schools to maintain the divisions of the past (e.g. disabled – “normal”). Thus, it is difficult for the educational practice applied to adapt to the new human rights protections for people with disabilities. Education in this context of functioning emerges as a key mechanism for maintaining the reproduction of social hierarchy and educational exclusion. Characteristically, teachers seem to rather agree that students with intellectual disabilities have accessibility difficulties in the formal education system. In the Greek literature, it has been established that there is a significant number of disabled people who are not included in the educational system and when they are, they do not receive the appropriate required education (Lampropoulou, 2004; OLME, 2008).

In addition, it is apparent from the findings of our research that the important others in the student environment, several times, do not constitute a supportive social capital. Their ambivalence and negativity slow down and, in many cases, interrupt the progress of students with intellectual disabilities towards social inclusion. Our research teachers stress that students with intellectual disabilities face discrimination and prejudices, several times by important members of the educational community (e.g., parents of non-disabled students) (Oliver, 1990; Rabiee et al., 2005). In Greek and international literature, it is mentioned that people with disabilities, both in the wider society and within the educational system, are confronted with perceptions and stereotypes about their abilities, which can potentially lead to their social and educational exclusion (Zoniou-Sideri, 2000; Oliver, 1990; Rabiee et al., 2005). Through the teachers' views, it emerges that the rhetoric of inclusive education in public discourse and the respect for diversity does not seem to apply to pedagogical practice. The social and educational exclusion of students with disabilities is the result of the functioning of social and environmental structures and dominant negative social representations (Barnes, & Sheldon, 2010).

It is necessary to mention that teachers' conceptualizations of people with intellectual disabilities and the difficulties they face, due to globalized educational standards, the conditions of the educational system or the lack of their education and training, mediate and reproduce, despite the legislative regulations, the medical-biological model (Franklin, 2018). Accountability and efficiency, which are the new principles of education, put pressure on and create conditions of risk and alienation for teachers (Green, 2010). In 2021, neoliberalism forms a different conceptualisation of the educational framework, raising more pressing issues related to the autonomy and power of the teacher. Whereas, the teacher's adherence to the 'normalised' norms and practices provided by the medico-biological model relieves the teacher of the responsibility of failure, which is transferred to the disabled individual, but also to the institutional context (e.g. inadequate infrastructure, insufficient training, etc.). The post-modern educational framework undermines the freedom of teaching and pedagogical choices that would challenge established patterns of everyday educational practice.

5. Recommendations

Further research on the topic of inclusive education of students with intellectual disabilities would be useful to conduct a comparative study between island regions and urban centres, as well as a comparative survey between Mediterranean countries. Finally, it would also be important to be explored the processes by which teachers upgrade their teaching skills.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can mention that there is ambivalence among Greek secondary education teachers, regarding the inclusive education of students with intellectual disabilities. It also appears that students with intellectual disabilities face phenomena of educational exclusion, first, because the educational system itself with its structures (infrastructure, teacher training, information, etc.) cannot meet their increased needs and secondly a percentage of teachers and parents of formal students have a negative view of their inclusion into the formal educational system. It is, therefore, imperative: a) to develop the pedagogical training of secondary school teachers in their universities, in relation to special education, b) to develop a culture of solidarity and participation in schools, through processes, supported by local community initiatives, actions by school principals and the heads of education, as well as political interventions of the Ministry of Education and c) to become politically perceived that in order to implement an education policy aimed at the inclusive education of people with disabilities, it is necessary to raise awareness in society on issues of respect and acceptance of diversity.

About the Author

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