ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Greek Secondary Education Teachers' Views on Inclusive Education of People with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This paper aimed to investigate Greek secondary education teachers' views on people with intellectual disabilities, their inclusion in the typical educational system, and the dimensions of social and educational exclusion that may be associated with it.*

Method: *The qualitative research design involved semi-structured interviews with 18 Greek secondary school teachers.*

Results: *It was revealed that people with intellectual disabilities face educational exclusion for two reasons. The first is because the structure of the education system itself cannot meet their increased needs, and the second is due to the fact that a percentage of secondary education teachers feel negative about their inclusion in the typical education system.*

Conclusion and Implications: *The implemented policy for the co-education of people with intellectual disabilities in Greece is not effective due to endogenous difficulties. It is necessary to orient the educational policy towards an education for all without "filters" of social exclusions.*

Key words: *secondary school teachers, intellectual disability, inclusion, educational exclusion*

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion of people with disabilities is often part of the educational discourse and, at the same time, its evaluation influences the way educational policies and specific educational practices are implemented. Investigating teachers' views on the issue can highlight aspects of this discourse, enhance their interaction with

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people with disabilities, and support the latter's right to be included in typical education. Within this context, typical education teachers' views on people with intellectual disabilities and their inclusion highlight the most important school-mediating factors for the biggest group with a disability within the education system.

About 3% of the general population has an IQ of less than two standard deviations below the average. In 1998, people with intellectual disabilities in Greece accounted for 23.64% of all people with special educational needs (Kotaridis et al, 1998). The Eurostat report (1995a,b) states that 25.4% of people with intellectual disabilities are illiterate, 59.9% are primary school graduates, 5.7% are junior high school graduates, 5.6% are high school graduates and 3.4% are higher education graduates. During the school year 2005–2006 there were 2389 students with intellectual disabilities in primary education (Ministry of Education, 2008; Georgiadi et al, 2012), whereas during the school year 2009-2010 there were 9272 students with intellectual disabilities at all levels of education. Here it should be noted that there is no official data on intellectual disability in general, a fact that makes it difficult to assess the situation in Greece (Anagnostopoulos & Soumaki, 2011).

The American Association for Mental and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2018) mentioned that intellectual disability is defined as significant limitations on one's cognitive functioning and adaptive behaviour in the environment before the age of 18 (Luckasson et al, 2002). This definition has important implications in Greece, for the evaluation procedures of the official diagnostic institutions of the education system and the treatment of children with intellectual disability (Bablekou & Kazi, 2016). Laws 3699/2008 and 4547/2018 define a strict framework for the categorisation of persons with special educational needs, despite the provisions for inclusive education. Nowadays the term 'learning disabilities' covers, with a more functional and social manner, the definition of intellectual disability. A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life (Mencap, 2014). According to the definition above, intellectual disability is perceived as an individual's functioning in the social and environmental context.

The older definitions were based on the conceptual and epistemological context of the medical model, presented as an illustration of a given objective reality, which is articulated as a reference to the power of the majority of people without

disabilities. On the contrary, within the social model, intellectual disability is perceived as a social construct that provides these individuals with an alternative way of approaching their social interaction and coexistence (Rapley, 2004). Despite criticism that the social model has received (Shakespeare, 2006) and the emergence of other approaches (e.g., Multidimensional Learning Model), the emphasis on social approaches to disability is focused on mediating factors of the context, without silencing the body's constraints (Beaudry, 2016).

At the same time, the term 'intellectual disability' was used in the past decade instead of the medical term 'mental retardation', in order to emphasise the interaction of the individual with the environment and the adaptability of the social context to the individual's diversity (Stainton, 2001; Schroeder et al, 2002). The term 'intellectual disability' further facilitates modern career practices which focus on functional behaviour and environmental factors and place the individual's support within a socio-ecological context. This term is less unpleasant or offensive to people with disabilities and is consistent with international terminology. In addition, in recent years the term 'learning disability' has been used to cover a wide range of learning difficulties, including people with intellectual disabilities and specific learning disabilities (Russell et al, 2017; Franklin, 2018; Siegel, 2018).

Greek Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education of People with Intellectual Disabilities

Inclusive education is an educational reform against failure, social and educational exclusion (Slee, 2011). According to Booth and Ainscow (2011), inclusive education encompasses: (a) support given to each individual so that she/he feels that she/he belongs to the educational community; (b) reduction of exclusion, discrimination, and barriers to learning and participation; and (c) modification of culture, policies, and practices, so that education can respond to the diversity of the student population in an unprejudiced and egalitarian manner. Inclusive education is a political and cultural change, a deconstruction of the conservative reality of educational frameworks (general - specific) and shapes them into an area of equality, social justice, solidarity and respect for diversity (Ballard, 1997). Furthermore, inclusive education indicates the need for a radical reform of the educational policy, and organisation of the curriculum and pedagogy (Skidmore, 2004).

Both special and typical education teachers seem to have a positive attitude towards including people with an intellectual disability into the typical education

system (Karelou, 2007; Memisevic & Hodzic, 2011; Ojok & Wormnæs, 2013), with the former being more positive (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000). Research has also found that the type of disability and its severity (Burge, 2017), teachers' experience (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000; Karelou, 2007), their information and appropriate training (basic and in-service) (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000; Vernier, 2012; Ojok & Wormnæs, 2013; Sermier Dessemontet et al, 2014) play an important role in the effectiveness of inclusive processes. Teachers' confidence in their skills and training is important as well (Alshemari, 2016). At the same time, Malki and Einat (2018) report that inclusion of people with an intellectual disability, 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, Israeli teachers propose to increase the number of hours, improve the teacher education curriculum and develop cooperation between typical and special education teachers, as well as between experts in inclusive education. In addition, in a research conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, teachers have suggested that in order to successfully implement inclusive education: (a) additional support should be given to teachers of typical education by the school administrators and to special education teachers so that personalised programmes for children with intellectual disabilities can be developed; and (b) it is important to develop more appropriate teaching materials and reduce the number of students in typical classrooms (Memisevic & Hodzic, 2011).

Within this context in Greece, it should be noted that from Law 4397/1929 where there is a fragmentary approach to the education of people with intellectual disabilities, it has been observed to date that special education, initially, and the contemporary demand for inclusive education, are founded on an organisational structure without systematic and strong scientific basis. Administrative decisions are the result of the centralised system of development of the Greek educational system, which is usually hindered by the inability of the Greek state to cope with its pathogens (Lambropoulou & Panteliadou, 2000; Charoupias, 2011). Within the Greek educational system, the medical-biological model is dominant when educational policies for people with disabilities are to be implemented. Classification and segregation remain, and the integration of a person with disabilities is done through assessment procedures, not to better regulate his/her inclusion but rather to adapt the person to a structured educational environment. Moreover, there is an evident contradiction within the Greek educational policy between the democratic discourse of the official reports of the state on special

and inclusive education and the teachers' daily educational practices and the way that educational policies are implemented. The Greek Ombudsman reports (2014, 2015) point out the lack of support for students with disabilities who attend general schools, the shortage of specialised teachers and the underfunding of special education in Greece. Whereas the official discourse of the state is oriented towards education for all, it is not translated into practice within the educational framework and context (Deropoulou-Derou, 2012). Also, in Greece, while existing research is more general and based on attitudes towards disability (e.g., Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010; Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014; Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2015; Soulis et al, 2016), there is insufficient research on intellectual disability and teachers' attitudes towards the co-education of these students.

Objective

In the context of the North Aegean (Greece), which is an island region and a gateway for immigrants and refugees, no relevant research on the aforementioned topic has been carried out. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate teachers' views on people with intellectual disabilities, their inclusion in the typical educational system, and the dimensions of social and educational exclusion that may be associated with it. (The research data presented here is part of a more general research into the Greek education system which aims to investigate the attitudes of teachers towards different categories of people with disabilities and their integration into the education system.)

METHOD

Participants

The study participants were 18 Greek secondary education teachers from schools of the largest cities of the three islands that constitute the prefecture of the North Aegean (Greece). Of the 21 secondary schools, 11 were drawn by lot. Based on the population of teachers in these schools, the voluntary participation was requested of a certain number of teachers who lack special education and training.

There were 12 women and 6 men among the 18 participating teachers. Most of them were philologists, between 30 and 55 years of age.

Study Design

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews.

The respondents were informed about the nature and objectives of the research and the details of the interview were clarified to conclude the "narrative contract." They were also assured that their personal data was protected so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and permission to record the interviews was obtained.

Data Collection

The data collection was done in the participants' personal space (i.e., home, office, etc.). The discourse was then transcribed and analysed. The validity and effectiveness of categorisation were ensured through the application of the rules of objectivity, exhaustiveness, appropriateness and mutual exclusion.

Data Analysis

Based on the participants' discourse, the researcher could understand the reality and the reconstruction of its parts.

The parts of reality are framed and reconstructed based on the context in which fragments are placed and drawn from their semantic part. Every part of this reality is delineated and specified in a particular way (Tsiolis, 2006). Social scientists, when analysing interviews, try to reconstitute how individuals identify and conceptualise the particular cases they face. This understanding and the subjective approach of reality highlight both the individuality of the case and the perception of social representations and legitimate models of disability that exist within the Greek society and the educational system. Individuals' understanding and conceptualisation is socially structured and historically shaped by their negotiation and experiential experience in their own ecosystem (Tsiolis, 2006).

The current research endeavoured to formulate categories and sub-categories with thematic analysis, so that in a dialectical way the transformation of reality is revealed through individuals' meanings and their perceptions of social reality. All of this, of course, was done under the theoretical perspective of disability approaches, and the interviewees' diachronic lived experience over the past and their current perspective on their narratives. After transcribing the participants' interviews, their responses were codified by highlighting the categorisations of the reality that the teacher-participants had given through their conceptualisations.

The aforementioned were then analysed using the theoretical framework of disability (e.g., Finkelstein, 1980; Barnes et al, 1999; Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Slee, 2011), without having forgotten that new categorisations of social reality may be emerging through the participants' discourse.

To achieve the above and for the research content to be valid in relation to the subject investigated, the interview guide was constructed on the basis of the following interrelated factors: (1) theoretical disability models (Finkelstein, 1980; Barnes et al, 1999; Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Slee, 2011); (2) the globalised education framework (Gewirtz et al, 2009); (3) the situation of the special welfare state; and (4) the situation of special education in Greece (Stasinos, 1991; Charoupias, 2011; Chronopoulou-Pantazi, 2011). In conducting the research, the interview guide included questions about: (a) the concept of disability; (b) educational policies for inclusive education; (c) teachers' attitudes towards including people with intellectual disabilities into the typical educational system; (d) barriers and difficulties in inclusive education; and (e) the attitudes of other members of the educational community (i.e., pupils, parents).

RESULTS

From the analysis of the interviews, four thematic categories emerged that concerned: a) Views on inclusion, b) Relationships of students with disabilities and teachers, c) Views of typical students' parents, and d) Educational policy. These are analysed, based on the sub-categories that emerged, while excerpts from the participants' dialogues are listed.

Views on Inclusion

When asked about the access to education that students with intellectual disabilities have, the participating teachers mentioned that the severity of intellectual disability plays a key role and that the inclusion of students with intellectual disability into the typical Greek education system would not have a positive impact on them. Also, their reference to the term 'mental retardation' reflects the reality that teachers are poorly informed about current developments and claims of the disability movement and continue to use terms previously used in the medical model.

"It depends on the case. Children and young people with mobility problems, for example, can clearly join… mental retardation and other disabilities want their own environment in which these individuals can more easily be included; that is, inclusion … Children and young people with mental retardation want their own space and their own inclusion process" (Teacher D).

"I get fearful when a person has severe mental retardation and slows down the classroom" (Teacher E).

"In mental retardation, it is self-evident, that the students can neither always cooperate and understand - nor perceive and participate in what we provide" (Teacher L).

In addition to the above, most of the teachers (11 out of 18) considered the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in the typical Greek education system either as something that could produce negative results, or as something difficult to handle which may even be disturbing to the others in the classroom.

"… Wouldn't it be a little bad for a child with Down's syndrome, or mental retardation, to go to a regular school? Just think about the way these children will be treated... would be unfair because they would also feel rejected" (Teacher N).

"I find mental retardation more difficult than any other physical disability, eh, due to the fact that a person has a real problem with communicating and getting what she/he is taught; that is, in order for one to be taught, one should be calm" (Teacher E).

"Mental retardation is the most difficult due to the fact that it is difficult to approach these children and young people, and keep their attention which is needed to assimilate what you are trying to teach them" (Teacher F).

Relationships of Students with Disabilities and their Teachers

The 18 teachers did not seem to have firm views about their interactions with students with intellectual disabilities and their inclusion in their classroom. Opinions ranged from positive and democratic (6), to neutral (4) or conflicting (8).

"I think it's not my personal choice about which students to put in my classroom or not, that is not up to me to choose and it is also very bad to choose which

children enter and which ones do not. A classroom should be an environment where everyone is accepted, and that is what we must promote" (Teacher B).

"No, I do not think it is democratic, since there is no such infrastructure and organisation to help these children and young people to be included in the school properly. No, it is not democratic" (Teacher L).

Views of Parents of Typical Students

Most of the interviewed teachers (12 out of 18) reported the negative behaviour of some parents. Feelings such as fear and ignorance are inherent in the behaviour of members of the educational community, although this has changed in recent years. Moreover, very few teachers (2 out of 18) thought that some parents of other students believe that people with disabilities are a 'punishment' for their parents, without themselves embracing this attitude.

"…… typical pupils reproduce the fear of some parents. Some parents are the first to react, out of fear and ignorance… " (Teacher C).

"……… this racist behaviour is expressed by parents who do not accept the view that their children can be educated in the same place and are not properly informed. In recent years, of course, this situation has changed slowly; parents have been informed and they know that typical pupils must learn to live with these children in order for us (as a whole) to reach a holistic approach, social acceptance, and meaningful help (of these children)" (Teacher A) .

"Some believe that a child with a disability is a 'punishment' for their parents. Indeed, such a belief is held by some. In no way do I accept this. It has to do with (bad) luck if the disability comes from an accident or from nature or if it is by birth" (Teacher G).

Furthermore, some teachers (4 out of 18) referred to the importance of the family's role in the development of attitudes of students towards their class peers with disabilities.

"Here, of course, we can't talk about a rule, and that it is always the case. There are children who have become aware of these children at home and in school; they are very receptive to diversity, and we can say that these children many times embrace diversity" (Teacher F).

Finally, most of the teachers (15 out of 18) referred to information about disability issues that should be provided to parents.

 "……. of course, it is the parents of other students. Primarily, they should be more informed, so to be able to our society to include children with disabilities" *(Teacher K).*

Educational Policy

School Infrastructure, Facilities and Teaching Staff

At the same time, all the teachers referred to the shortcomings of logistical infrastructure and the conditions inherent in the education system, although they felt that efforts have been made to become more inclusive. Typical issues of infrastructure, organisation, syllabuses and modern teaching were among the most important issues that were discussed.

"The education system does not provide equal opportunities for everybody. I think that some efforts are being made at the moment, but for the most part I think there are serious shortcomings. The education system should be reorganised, to review some things such as curricula, the way the school functions, the infrastructure, and, more generally, I think that the state should take more care of the infrastructure" (Teacher A).

"The mainstream school sometimes finds it difficult to include some children into its school unit and there are no proper conditions. When there is no proper awareness (of the special needs of students with disabilities), the school culture is such that it neither has nor provides proper infrastructure..." (Teacher H).

Moreover, a good number of teachers (10 out of 18) mentioned that there are difficulties because most teachers in special education are substitutes, and they move to different schools every school year. This does not help build strong supporting social networks.

"I do not think there is safety or trust……. in special education, teachers are substitutes ……… children do not have persons for permanent reference point; the teacher is forced to change classes every year, and as a result, no close relationship of trust and safety is established, something that is needed in cases of people with disabilities" (Teacher M).

Teacher Training

All teachers were of the opinion that: (a) their education and training on disability is an important issue so that people with disabilities can be better included in the school; (b) the lack of training is an obstacle and a factor that creates fear and insecurities among teaching staff; (c) training and teacher training for children and youngsters with intellectual disabilities in the Greek educational system is inadequate; and (d) teacher training helps them in raising awareness about disability and, eventually, can contribute to change the culture of schools.

> *"… and of course, there is the lack of information, proper training of general education teachers on special education issues so these children ……… are still aimed at and labelled" (Teacher A).*

> *"As I have said, I think that general education of teachers is inadequate, and I think there should be continuous and compulsory training" (Teacher C).*

> *"…teachers are not adequately trained to accept the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, but there is a growing awareness of the needs of these students and there is an increasing awareness of students with disabilities and so, cowardly in recent years, this culture has been changing shyly and slowly …." (Teacher H).*

> *"Nowadays teachers should be educated and trained on the issues of inclusion of all pupils i.e., mainstreaming … there is a need for training with programmes aimed at the inclusion of all pupils, regardless of their particularities" (Teacher F).*

DISCUSSION

This research study attempted to investigate teachers' views on students with intellectual disabilities, their inclusion in the typical educational system, and the dimensions of social and educational exclusion that may be associated with it. Teachers seemed to agree that students with intellectual disabilities have difficulties in accessing the typical Greek mainstream education system and, even after inclusion in it, they are confronted with discrimination and prejudice by some stakeholders in the educational community (e.g., parents of students without disabilities). The rhetoric of inclusive education in the public discourse does not seem to be implemented in pedagogical practices. Some teachers refer to "*mental retardation*", thus emphasising the shortcomings of the person with disabilities

and transferring the responsibility for his/her difficulties to the student with an intellectual disability himself/herself. The frequent reference to the term 'mental retardation' reflects the reality of poor knowledge among teachers regarding the developments and claims of the disability movement about their rights and entitlements and refers to old ideas embedded in the medical model (Angelides et al, 2006; Koutrouba et al, 2008; Soulis, 2013; Giavrimis, 2018, 2019). People with intellectual disabilities, both within society and the education system, are confronted with perceptions and stereotypes that can potentially lead to social and educational exclusion (Yuker, 1976; Oliver 1990; Azizi-Kalantzi et al, 1996; Dimou, 1996; Zoniou-Sideris, 2000; Holt 2003; Lambropoulou, 2004; Rabiee et al, 2005). This is an outcome of how both the social and environmental structures and dominant social representations function within a given society (Barnes & Sheldon, 2010).

At the same time, teachers are sceptical about the inclusion of children and youngsters with intellectual disabilities. Their disagreements relate, on the one hand, to the severity of intellectual disability and, on the other hand, to inadequate education and training of teachers to effectively work with such children and youngsters. These findings are in line with research data in international and Greek literature (Wishart & Manning, 1996; Zoniou-Sideri & Deropoulou-Derou, 1998; Avramidis et al, 2000; Zoniou-Sideri, 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Soulis, 2002; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Reversi et al, 2007; Fyssa et al, 2014; Genova, 2015). This is a confirmation of both the inadequacy of the education system to include students with disabilities in the typical mainstream school system in a more appropriate and functional way, and teachers' inability to handle such children and youngsters (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014; Tzivinikou, 2015; Mavropalias & Anastasiou, 2016). At this point, it should be noted that teachers' expectations of children and youngsters with intellectual disabilities resemble the medical-biological model. This is despite Greek legislation and educational proclamations of social justice and equality in educational opportunities, grounded in a globalised and post-modern environment, which should allow for freedom of teaching and pedagogical choices that would challenge the established patterns of daily educational practices (Slee, 2003).

Moreover, in the current educational policy for special education in Greece, there is a lack of attention towards the importance of special infrastructure for those children and youngsters with special needs, and there is a failure to adequately inform the general public about the importance of inclusion of children and

youngsters with intellectual disabilities in the mainstream classroom. The deficiencies in the administrative and organisational structures, and the confusion while the necessary educational practices are being implemented, aggravate the existing problems (Lambropoulou & Pandeliadou 2000; Hellenic Statistical Authority- HAS, 2007, 2008; OLME, 2008). Besides, teacher training for secondary school teachers does not include specific attention to the importance of special needs education and co-education of children and youngsters with disabilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Kalyva et al, 2007; Giavrimis, 2018; Pappas et al , 2018).

CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that children and youngsters with intellectual disabilities face educational exclusion due to the fact that on the one hand, the education system itself cannot respond to their special needs, and, on the other hand, a percentage of secondary education teachers react negatively towards the inclusion of such children in the mainstream education system. It is therefore imperative that: (a) the pedagogical training of secondary education teachers in special needs education during their university education should be developed and enhanced, so that they become aware of and able to adequately respond to the needs of children and youngsters with learning disabilities; (b) a culture of solidarity and inclusion in schools should be developed, through processes supported by local community initiatives, school principals, and the Ministry of Education ; and (c) it should be realised and recognised that when an educational policy aimed at the inclusion of people with disabilities is being pursued, it is necessary to transform existing infrastructures, professionally upgrade teaching staff and raise the general population's awareness and acceptance of diversity.

Despite the limitations of this qualitative research, it appears that the implemented policy for the co-education of children and youngsters with intellectual disabilities in Greece is not effective. Further research is necessary to establish the critical factors for successfully including children and youngsters with intellectual disabilities in mainstream schools in Greece.

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