

The Inclusion Paradigm in Greek schools: does just also mean justified?

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Abstract

This article aims to clarify the term “inclusion” and to highlight its value within the school environment, as well as to promote inclusive education in Greece. First, an attempt is made to define the term followed by the presentation of the relevant legal framework. Next the differences between Special Education and Co-Education are pinpointed in order for the reader to identify their basic differentiating elements. Then the problems that hinder the implementation of inclusion in schools are presented and ways to solve them are suggested. Finally, the terms of “Inclusive” and “Intercultural Education” are analyzed and compared. Inclusion in Greece, despite the obstacles it faces, can become a dominant and constructive way of learning.

Keywords: inclusion; inclusive education; co-education; intercultural education; social justice.

Introduction

In this article, the author wishes to capture the knowledge and values gained after years of educational experience. It is based on the belief that teachers should not be complacent about the knowledge they have already acquired; they must constantly evolve in order to create capable and useful citizens for society. Central to this perception is that on one hand, inclusion should be the present and the future of good pedagogical practice, and on the other hand that its foundation is not a utopian idea but has significant prospects for implementation. The paper was prepared in order to highlight the main problems faced by the efforts to apply this method in Greek schools and then to formulate proposals to overcome them. The last

section includes the analysis of Intercultural Education, in order to emphasize the need to combine these two methods into a broader Paradigm.

Public education in Greece gradually recognized the pedagogical value of integration, highlighting it as a primary concern. The co-education of children with disabilities and special-needs education received a lot of attention in the last decade in Greece. Internationally, inclusion is at the top of national education policy. The integration of the disabled learners and the typical school-age children represents a fundamental socio-political commitment and is a major prerequisite before establishing an intercultural school. Although it is provided on the one hand in International Declarations and Agreements and on the other hand in the Constitution of our country, the fundamental human right to free access to high-quality education is often curtailed in practice. It is suggested here that the educational community as a whole

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must participate in the foundation of a School for All, a pioneering stage capable of leading us later on to a Society for All.

History and Definitions

Emerging at the end of the 20th century, inclusive education concerns the educational integration of students and the elimination of exclusion within the school environment. But even before that, it was Lévi-Strauss whose critical ethnographical approach set the stage for what was to become “inclusive education” and “interculturalism”. Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* sees ethnology as a matter of observation; he re-examines the subject, the observer, as a vital part of the object, the observation. “To stay out of society is not my choice” he states. And continues: “Observation is primal, before any logical construction, in any conceptualization”. Moreover, observation *per se* is both a study and a kind of understanding of a human group, of a society, of an ethnic group – all these in the “sharing of a common condition” (Lévi-Strauss, 1973; Grażyna, 2014).

Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. “It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded – not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too”.¹ From the aforementioned definition given by UNICEF, we see that inclusion is a broad concept, largely incorporating intercultural education. It is a dynamic, complex and endless process of engaging all students, with social implications, that aims to upgrade the quality of the educational system. Similarly, intercultural education may be defined as: “the response to classroom diversity aiming to go beyond passive coexistence, to achieve a developing and sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of understanding of, respect for and a productive dialogue between the different groups”.²

1. <https://www.unicef.org/education/inclusive-education> accessed 7/5/2022

2. <http://educulture.info/intercultural-education/> accessed: 7/1/2022

There is no unanimity as to which Greek term translates exactly the English name of these processes, however the phrase “a school for all” («ένα σχολείο για όλους») is often used to capture the nature of inclusion. In any learning environment that adopts this educational approach, diversity proper becomes a source of learning and education is enriched by matters of social justice (Soulis 2008). The modern literature integrates all students in the scope of inclusive education, aiming to increase their active participation in the school environment and maximize their abilities (Bossart et al. 2013). It should be noted, that in order to apply the approach of inclusion, the daily and untiring effort of the teacher is needed, which is necessary if one is to respond equally to the needs of all children. This is not a process that, subject to the conditions, sometimes comes to an end, but a continuous effort to integrate all trainees (Gerosimou, 2014). It is therefore understood that the term “unified education” reflects the right of all children with special educational needs to participate in the educational process and at the same time the obligation of the educational community to perceive these individuals as equal.

Legal framework

The international community, after realizing the mosaic of learning diversity that characterizes the school environment, has in recent years recognized the right to provide inclusive education without restrictions to people with disabilities. This has led to the development of the legal basis that enshrines the importance of inclusion in the classroom (UNESCO, 1994). A milestone in the legal foundation is the World Conference in Salamanca (1996), which explicitly states the commitment of all states to admit all students to the local school. A milestone in the practical transformation of school inclusion is also the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). This is the first binding text that secures inclusive education and promotes the adoption of a child-centered pedagogy. Subsequently, Greece has issued a law which prohibits the marginalization of persons with disabilities from the general education system; individualized support to students and ad-

equate training of teachers is required. The axes of the legal framework can be listed as follows:

- a) Respect for human rights
- b) Equality
- c) Relevance
- d) Appropriately
- e) Efficiency and Effectiveness

The legal basis for modern Greek school revolves around the National Action Plan for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.³ The goal is to build sustainable societies without exclusions, something that can only be achieved when all children learn together regardless of their individual differences. These developments testify to the change in the way the disability is treated by both the international community and the national legislature: it is not a “disease”, as much as it is not a handicap to be gifted: both, however, are challenging for both educators and parents (Papageorgiou 2015). As much as the mean does, the extremes also represent a manifestation of human diversity; it is no longer the student who needs to adapt, but the educational system that is being transformed in order to meet the diverse needs of the apprentices. The institutionalization of inclusive education is the beginning of implementation of the said approach; however, the agreed declarations only fulfil their goal when they are systematically implemented by the various educational institutions.

The reality, however, confirms the Educational System’s inability to implement the above commitments. This is evidenced by the numerous reports; among them and the recent report of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020) entitled “A long way to go for LGBTI equality”. The report points that more than 50% of the respondents were victims of some form of discrimination, while 45% of them have experienced discrimination and exclusion in the school environment. Although state commitments are gradually transforming the school community into a supportive

environment, current data continue to highlight the inadequate safeguarding of the universal right of access to safe, non-violent and inclusive learning environments. In Greece, there are also examples that show there are still changes needed in the relevant laws. Our country is not ready to accept and welcome all students, because the current legal framework does not cover every aspect of inclusive education. There is a need for legislation changes.

Special Education and Inclusion Differences

The term “special-needs education” appears at the beginning of the 20th century to hide the inability of the educational system to offer all the necessary and appropriate skills to students with learning disabilities. According to the international institutional framework, the term “student with a disability” refers to persons “with mental retardation, sensory disabilities, chronic health problems, speech or language disorders, attention deficit disorder, mental disorders, multiple disabilities, delinquent behavior”. The concern of special-needs education is to provide assistance and to improve the physical, mental and social condition of children with disabilities. The institution of special-education schools exists in parallel with general education schools and takes place in independent special education units, integration departments or, sometimes, specially designed rooms. It is, therefore, at an interdisciplinary level and takes on a medical-pathological character, with the educational personnel taking actions aimed at strengthening the student’s socialization but also their educational development. The model of special-needs education, however, reinforces practices of institutionalization and marginalization of people with disabilities as it emphasizes the element of differentiation, thus leading to the alienation and social exclusion of people with disabilities (Kakavoulis, 1994).

The model of inclusive education, in contrast, identifying the weaknesses of special-needs education aims at eliminating prejudices and contributes to increasing the social interaction of all students. Students interact and acquire knowledge that they then utilize through their active participation

3. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/educational-support-and-guidance-27_el accessed: 7/1/2022

in school, neighborhood, family, community. The requirements are commensurate with the capabilities and personality of each student with diversity not being seen as an obstacle, but as a natural feature of a pluralistic society. Each student is not required to adapt to the requirements of general education, but the teaching methodology is one that changes and takes forms suitable to satisfy each learner. The majority of the educational community today considers the method of inclusion as the most appropriate form of education, and for this reason it is a priority in many countries (Ainscow 2020). The prevailing perception is that the implementation of inclusion programs increases the quality of education and stimulates the team spirit of the classroom. The school recognizes that all children are different from each other but are entitled to equal access to adequate education and an integrated lifestyle that they will choose (Michaelides, 2009).

In conclusion, the element that significantly differentiates the two above-mentioned educational methods is general goal and direction of the learning activity: on the one hand the special-needs education emphasizes the element of separation of students and the adoption of different educational paths, on the other hand the co-education aims at the inclusion of all educational process aiming at developing the student's both social and learning skills. The problem is no longer attributed to the individual (tactics applied by special-needs education), but the educational environment itself investigates the causes and seeks solutions to address it (Ainscow, 2005).

Barriers to Inclusive Education in Greece

Despite the collective efforts made to implement inclusive education, the existing efforts are at an early stage as there are complex obstacles blocking the way towards changing the educational system (Ainscow & Miles, 2009). Below is an attempt to list the main obstacles and suggest possible ways to overcome them:

A) Absence of Implementation of Differentiated Inclusive Policies

The indiscriminate adoption of models of inclusive education due to the lack of differentiated educational policies by national institutions leads to failed efforts (Bualar, 2016). The bureaucrats in charge of the development of the relevant programs must take into account the population diversity, the different temperament of learners according to their location and the unique characteristics of each different location. Greece may be a relatively small country, however, its rich geography (hundreds of islands, but also mountains, plains and cities) create these differences. Such diversity is only enhanced when considering that traditions, economic conditions and political backgrounds also vary from country to country, therefore a single educational plan is misplaced and destined to fail. This complex scene, after all, is the reason why inclusive policies succeed; the fact that, among other things, they rely on the local features of their place.

B) Collaboration of Many Different Parts

It is obvious that the promotion of an inclusive environment requires the development of a stable and constantly evolving communication network. State, society, social and support structures, school community, parents and students; everyone must work together and share common values and ideals. This is difficult to achieve, as it is rare for a large number of people to have a generalized and common understanding of the inclusive culture and the corresponding vision. A prerequisite for the perfect cooperation of these interconnected parties is the existence of healthy communication, a requirement that often ends up being utopian, given the general complexity of interpersonal relationships – let alone of different organizations and institutions where more often than not, bureaucracy prioritizes processes over people. Any conflicts and controversies in all these critical points make it difficult to carry out such a radical change in the educational reality (Angelidis, 2011). Especially in Greece, all too often the problem ends up being bureaucratic: the centralized system of government of our country lacks immediacy, thus discouraging the taking of initiatives and the timely exchange of views (Gavriilidou-Tsielepi, 2011).

C) *Outline of the Curriculum*

An obstacle to the promotion of a successful inclusive policy is the current planning of the syllabus, which is considered limited and, admittedly, has “rigid” characteristics. This organizational barrier is inflated due to the large amount of learning material that must be covered, in view of the in-school and national exams at the end of the year in combination with the given (limited) time. Thus, teachers usually lack the required flexibility. The situation is aggravated by inadequate (and sometimes anachronistic) textbooks, a lack of adequate logistical infrastructure, and limited accessibility to – existence even of – school facilities. School units, too, especially in large urban centers, consist of a large number of students with the units themselves becoming cumbersome and crowded. State funding and European funds do little to improve the situation as they are comparatively *low* if one takes into consideration the size of the problem (Avramidis et al., 2013). In this way, the constitutionally required equality remains inapplicable, while at the same time for the students with limited learning abilities, the stress, frustration and the feeling of inadequacy that they experience when they inevitably fail to meet the school requirements is enhanced.

D) *Insufficient Cognitive Background*

A major obstacle to moving to a more inclusive school is the lack of teacher training. The legally prescribed training of teachers often remains at a theoretical level and ends up being an inapplicable measure. We are, therefore, led to teachers who lack the necessary knowledge and are called upon to manage, without supervision, pluralistic departments with a strong element of heterogeneity. Diversity not only remains unexploited, but also becomes a hurdle to progress. On one hand, there is the risk of *labeling* students, and on the other hand, there is a downward trend in the students’ school performance. The attempt for inclusion results in a very laborious process when even the teachers themselves do not have the necessary cognitive resources to face such issues. In some cases, teachers even refuse to change their teaching methods. Accustomed to the pre-exist-

ing teacher-centered framework, they seem reluctant to change and persist in their anachronistic practices.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, already since 2003, issued a report stating that:⁴

- “decentralised funding approaches that enable local organisations to support effective practice. A decentralised model is likely to be more cost-effective and more responsive to the needs of local populations”,
- “flexibility for schools in using financial resources according to their own identified needs and requirements within the context of national policies”.

Such issues (esp. centralized mechanisms of funding) continue to plague Greek education at all levels – especially at the level we focus on, i.e., special needs and inclusive education. To this point the most successful model of inclusive and especially of intercultural education may be said to be that of Sweden where e.g., foreign students’ mother tongues are equally respected and supported along with Swedish within the class (Mokias 2019). Greece should adopt such practices from Sweden.

Suggestions for Dealing with Obstacles

The weaknesses that were identified keep the educational community from achieving a more inclusive school and therefore need to be addressed immediately. A society that is heterogeneous at its core cannot neither create homogeneous school environments, nor can it expect that such a framework can be equally appropriate for all students. It is therefore necessary to establish educational practices capable of defending the diversity of each child.

4. <https://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/key-principles-special-needs-education-recommendations-policy-makers> (English version, page 7). Accessed: 7/1/2022

Those in charge of educational planning (and, in particular, inclusive policy) must take into account diversity, and particularly be able to identify local peculiarities. Successful models from other countries can be used with critical thinking, after adapting to local needs. International cooperation also plays a key role here, as experts from all over the world can assist in this endeavor by formulating opinions and encouraging the development of a communication channel aimed at the exchange of views and experiences.

An important step for the closer approach of inclusive education in the Greek educational system is the modernization of multimedia as well as of interactive teaching material and the building infrastructure of the country. Numerous surveys confirm the unsatisfactory readiness of the school to respond to such an endeavor due to these factors (Angelidis 2011). Elementary school textbooks with incomplete reference to the various disabilities reinforce prejudice and promote marginalization within the student community. It is important to develop a safe and friendly environment, to create physiotherapy and occupational therapy units, to renovate sports facilities, computer rooms and laboratories, and make them suitable for all students. The *curriculum* also needs substantial restructuring and must be made adaptable to each school class. In this way the teacher will have access to a wide array of possibilities, the education will be differentiated and it will be able to suit each student according to their special abilities and disabilities. Obligations and requirements can be graded and changed according to the inclinations and the interests of each student. The country's bureaucratic system can be reduced by establishing more and decentralized decision-making centers in each administrative district, which would allow direct communication and faster response of the competent bodies. There are multiple aspects of cooperation that are important in order to be flexible and to effectively communicate with the goal to forge a more inclusive education. It is also important to strengthen the cooperation between the various evaluation centers and the educational community, while the staffing with qualified counselors and the development of support structures also plays a key role.

The position and attitude of teachers is equally important. They must systematically participate in training programs of both initial and in-service training in order to have positive beliefs and attitudes towards children with special educational abilities (Walker, 2016). It is important that they do not merely remain complacent about the knowledge acquired, thus becoming stagnant; Teachers should prepare appropriate projects that will contribute to bridging the gap among students themselves and will stimulate their feeling of "belonging" in the school environment (Tange, 2016). During the pedagogical session teachers must proceed and act according to the mental furniture of each child, a tactic that will lead to the absence of conflicts and will encourage the good performance of all students. The Greek educational community needs educators who aim at getting to know their students. Only in this way can they recognize the talents and the skills of the children, but also identify their weaknesses, in order to effectively work for their improvement and in this way contribute to the democratization of the school. Working in this direction will give the classroom a sense of intimacy and security: the teacher relinquishes the role of authority and co-operates with his students. This is also the model of the *empowering action coordinator* proposed by Papageorgiou & Papadopoulos (2018).

In addition, the role of leadership is catalytic in shaping a School for All. The school principal must eliminate the authoritarian type of communication by adopting a participatory style which will be the link between the complex networks that are called to participate in this collective effort. It is important for the school principal to consider any student as a unique personality, not to expect the same result from everyone, but help setting daily goals for each child. The administration of the school unit must be sensitive to the concerns of the students, listen to their requests and work towards the acceptance of diversity: this is the basis of social justice. The school principal who embraces the inclusive approach combines all available human and material resources in pursuit of "the perfect recipe", i.e., the best way to take advantage of all opportunities while minimizing the effect of the al-

ways present weaknesses. Such a leader should inspire and serve as a role model; encourage participation and stigmatize any attempt at isolation and marginalization. Finally, it is important for the school principal to inform the parents about the inclusive approach, passing on to them its basic principles. This is a particularly crucial as the principal's responsibilities cover all the parts of educational activity.

It becomes clear that the development of the inclusive method is challenged by issues that hinder its spread in the Greek educational system. The adoption of inclusion would create a substantial change that requires the merging of strengths and knowledge of all those involved in education.

The relationship between Inclusive and Intercultural Education

The modern globalized society we live in is basically multicultural. That is why the world political scene is pursuing policies aimed at recognizing and preserving its pluralistic nature. In this context, intercultural education is at the forefront, as it is the "key" that guarantees the forging of a climate of respect for the different. In a school that operates on the principles of intercultural education, there is no room for feelings of fear and intolerance. The goal is not just to *tolerate* the different "other", but to create unbreakable bonds of interaction among individuals and the "transfusion" of cultural beliefs to each other. The ideal school respects and promotes all cultures; all cultural backgrounds. It is not aimed at uncritically equalizing individuals but at highlighting the different cultural heritage each individual represents. Intercultural education, based on democratic principles and solidarity, offers equal access and opportunities to all students, while welcoming heterogeneity.

Based on these data, it is understood that Inclusive and Intercultural approaches are inspired by common values, as only with the use of inclusive methods can Intercultural Education be applied. Both are moving in the direction of defending and ensuring equal opportunities, encompassing the entire student community. The most important difference between these two concepts is that

intercultural education focuses on the cultural diversity of students, their ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio-economic characteristics, while the inclusive model focuses in people with disabilities.

For the parallel application of these two methods in the school context, the attitude of the school leadership is important as well. School leaders should encourage teacher-growth emphasizing the value of promoting intercultural communication skills. The creation of a school open to society also plays an important role in this direction: the participation of the community in the school environment, under the guidance of the teaching staff, promotes the value of diversity.

All in all, it is understood that Inclusive and Intercultural Education present a multitude of common fronts, since they are based on common principles. Although their connection is obvious, these two practices should not be confused. It is recommended, however, to combine them in order to experience positive changes across the spectrum of educational reality.

Conclusions

It is becoming clear that inclusion is the most appropriate form of education, as it contributes to the democratization of society. Its implementation, however, on a solid foundation presupposes the contribution of the educational community. The role of the teacher is changing, as the latter undertakes critical and multidimensional responsibilities. The data that emerge, after a constant effort to understand and study the bibliographic sources, testify to the need for further investigation of the relevant strategy, as there is a long way to go before it becomes a reality in Greek education. Proper lesson planning and remodeling of the educational edifice is required. Only then can we talk about providing equal opportunities and removing prejudices. When society can listen to every student, it can also guarantee that "no child is left behind".

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