



SCHOOL TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GREECE

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Abstract:

The aim of the present study was to examine the attitudes of Greek school teachers on the inclusion of students with special educational needs as well as the factors that may influence their attitudes (positive or negative). The sample of the survey consists of 120 (48 male and 72 female teachers) school teachers (Kindergarten and primary schools) from rural and urban areas of Northwest Greece. Research data was selected using the Greek version of ATIE scale, developed by Wilczenski (1992; 1995) and standardized in Greek by Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou (2014). The results of the survey showed that school teachers generally are in favor of including students with SENs, although their perceptions differ significantly based on some demographic factors.

Keywords: school teacher's attitudes, inclusion, factors, special educational needs, Greece

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, there has been a significant change in the education of children with disabilities and special educational needs, who did not have until then equal educational rights with their typically developing peers. At that time, the term "mainstreaming" and later "integration" were the dominant terms used to describe the participation of students with SENs in the regular classrooms. However, at the early

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1990s, a new term called "inclusion" was rarely used replacing the previous ones in order to better refer to the goals and values of education. The World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca in 1994, with the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, constitutes an important contribution to the agenda for achieving "*education for all*" and for making schools educationally more effective on a global basis (UNESCO, 1994).

At the same decade, thanks to Individual's with Disability Act (1997), the schools have been mandated to provide equal educational opportunities to all students regardless of their level of psychological and physical development and social or ethnic background. This meant that schools needed to change in order to accommodate all children, regardless of their educational needs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1997; Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000; Memisevic & Hodzic, 2011). Thus, the role of general education began to be redefined in many countries, leading in the implementation of various models that supported the attendance of all children in schools of general education (Zoniou-Sideris & Vlachou, 2006). One of the main purposes, as set out in the Disability Education Act of 1997 (IDEA), was the provision of educational training in Least Restrictive Environments (LRE), which meant the co-education to the maximum possible extent of children with special needs with children without disabilities (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 1997). Nevertheless, in most cases the results of the application of these practices showed that there was no essential change to the direction of the educational policy of inclusion instead there was a transfer of the ideas and practices of special education to the field of general education (Zoniou-Sideris et al., 2006). Even though policy and legislation of inclusion may enforce equality of access to educational opportunities for all students, it seems that it is still very difficult to be understood and put into practice in many countries (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Lambe & Bones, 2006; Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010).

1.1 Inclusive education in Greece

In Greece, after the 1980s, there was an organized effort to legislate special education for people with SENs in Greek mainstream education. Until then, the Special Education functioned with fragmentary laws and decrees (Batsiou, Bebetos, Panteli, & Antoniou, 2008).

As it was mentioned above, Salamanca Statement (1994) was a milestone for the promotion of inclusive education in "*a school for all*" (Vislie, 2003; Ferguson, 2008). Greece was among the 300 countries that represented in the Salamanca Conference (from 7 to 10 June 1994) and accepted the principles of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) for the education of students with disabilities within the mainstream education). Through the sign of the Salamanca Statement the pedagogical debate, as it was expected, has shifted from the integration to inclusion of students with and without special educational needs (Thomas, 1997; Vislie, 2003) affected at the same time "*Greek reality*". In the near future two new legislations (Law 2817/2000; Law 3699/2008) have

progressively made their appearance promoted inclusive practices in accordance to the new pedagogical policy (Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015).

According to the 2817/2000 law, a child with SENs has the right to attend a general school class through parallel support provided from a special education teacher or in an organized and staffed inclusive class (e.g. resource rooms), which function in the mainstream education. This support may cover some or all courses depending on the student's needs (Coutsocostas et al., 2010). Although this law was closer to an inclusive approach in practice children, whose type and degree of SEN was considered to impede their education in inclusive general classrooms, continue to attend special schools (Batsiou et al., 2008). As it is obvious, exclusion continued in a more refined way.

The current Greek legislation 3699/2008 also encourages the development of inclusion through co-taught practices but as the previous one its implementation focuses more on the partial education of pupils in the resource rooms rather than their full education in mainstream classes (Strogilos, Nikolarazi, & Tragoulia, 2012).

As inclusive practices in Greek school content are still inefficient, it is urgent to explore the main causes that put barriers to their successful implementation. According to Avramidis & Norwich (2002) and Lambe et al. (2006), one of the most important factors of successful and efficient inclusion of pupils with disabilities into regular classrooms is the attitudes of teachers who implement it. Therefore, the first effort that needs to be made is to develop a positive attitude towards people who are different but equal in terms of rights and obligations, regardless of social, economic or educational background (Lambe et al., 2006). This project can take place within the educational framework itself, with the help of teachers and the close cooperation of parents and the community.

1.2 From integration to the inclusion of students with SENs: Definition of terms

There are some terms that need to be defined for clarity of understanding. These are "*Integration*", "*Inclusion*" and "*pupil with Special Educational Needs*" (SENs).

A. Integration & Inclusion

The terms "integration" and "inclusion" are used interchangeably in literature to describe the process of teaching students with disabilities and typically developing students in general schools (Draper, Aleknavicius, & Crooks, 1998). The common feature of these terms is that both of them support the coexistence of individuals with and without special educational needs at an educational and social level. However, there is a very important difference between these two terms that should be highlighted, as it reflects a change in attitude towards disability and its treatment. In particular, the term "integration" is replaced by the term "inclusion" into the vocabulary of special education in order to express the new philosophy as regards the meaning and purposes of education. In case of *integration*, emphasis is placed on the placement of students with SEN in least restrictive environments without taking into account their special needs. Instead, *inclusion* focuses on restructuring the educational environment to meet the needs of a number of students with severe disabilities so that each school can

accommodate every child regardless of their disability and ensuring that all students belong to a community (Avramidis et al., 2000; Sarris, 2009). As Thomas (1997) mentioned *"Inclusion is more than 'integration': inclusion means being a part of the academic and social school environment, rather than simply being present in it"*. According to Vislie (2003) *"inclusion in education describes the process by which a school tries to meet the needs of students as individuals by reviewing and restructuring their curriculum"* (p.21). In other words, inclusion involves all those efforts that aimed from all students with and without special educational needs to attend classes in the same school context (Zigmond, 2003). Therefore, inclusion excels integration from the fact that it maintains the diverse unique traits of the group, while integration aims to hide them. It is clear that this linguistic distinction reflects, at the same time, a general change in social values towards disability and disable people which revealed with the movement from the medical (1980) to the social model of disability (1990) (Vislie, 2003). To conclude, the concept of inclusion is a preamble to human rights, arguing that all forms of distinction are morally unrighteous (Avramidis et al., 2000; Sarris, 2003).

B. Pupil with Special Educational Needs (SENs)

The term "people with SENs" is a general category of people, which includes other smaller and different subcategories. The current legislation on Special Education in Greece, as reflected through the 3699 Act of 2008, defines as people with SENs those who present:

"significant learning difficulties due to sensory, mental, cognitive, emotional, social and developmental problems, during their school years, which, according to the multidisciplinary assessment, affect the school adaptation and learning procedure" (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014, p. 208).

In particular, according to Vlachou, Didaskalou and Argyrakouli (2006) people with special educational needs are those who have:

"...visual or hearing impairments, people with severe motor disorders, mental disabilities, speech and language difficulties, specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia), complex cognitive, emotional and social difficulties, autism and other developmental disorders" (p. 203).

2. Method

In the present study was used the quantitative method to investigate the perceptions of preschool and primary teachers toward inclusion of pupils with SENs in general education as well as the possible factors related with those particular attitudes.

2.1 Participants

In this survey took part 120 educators from urban and rural districts of Northwest Greece (Epirus). 48 (10 male and 38 female) were general (N=36) and special (12)

educators who were working in Kindergarten and 72 (38 male and 34 female) were general (N= 52) and special (N= 20) primary teachers.

2.2 Research Instrument

The data collection was carried out through a questionnaire which consists of two sections. The first section includes general demographic questions in which each participant were asked to provide information for seven variables such as gender, age, highest level of education, qualification level, previous experience in teaching people with a disabilities, previous training in special education, knowledge of disability Act/policies.

The second part of the instrument was the Greek version of "Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Scale" (Wilczenski, 1992; 1995) developed by Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou (2014). This scale consists of 16 statements for primary educators and 14 for preschool educators (items 1 and 5 omitted) which grouped in 4 factors assessing four different aspects of inclusive education: (i) *physical inclusion* (the mainstreaming of students with physical disabilities), (ii) *behavioural inclusion* (the identification of appropriate range of behaviour), (iii) *social inclusion* (students with and without disabilities interacting with each other as peers) and (iv) *academic inclusion* (including students with disabilities in a regular class curriculum). The degree of agreement with each statement was scored on a 6- point Likert scale, rating from 1 "strongly disagree" to 6 "strongly agree". It is evident from the above, that lower total scores correspond to positive attitudes of teachers towards inclusion whereas the higher ones to less positive or negative attitudes.

2.3 Data collection

During the implementation phase of the survey, participants after having been informed of its purposes and by giving their permission to participate in it, complete the "Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Scale", which was standardized for the Greek population. The completion of the questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes.

2.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0). Firstly, it was conducted a confirmatory factor analysis for testing the underlying structure and dimensionality of the items of the Greek version of ATIES. Also, a reliability analysis (Chronbach's a) was carried out for testing the reliability of the Questionnaires' scales. In addition, it was conducted a descriptive statistic analysis for calculating the means and standard deviations of each factor of the scale. Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was done in order to examine possible relations between demographic factors of the sample and the subscales of the "Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Scale".

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics for the Demographics of the Sample

From the total sample (N= 120), the majority (60%) were female (N= 72) teachers whereas male teachers were 48 (40%). In addition, most participants (69%) were 31-50 years old (N= 83). The highest educational level of the respondents was a Doctoral Diploma (N= 2) but this represents only a very small percentage of the total sample (1.6 %). The other 66% had a bachelor degree (N= 92) on education, while 22.3 % held a master degree (N= 28) mainly in special education. When participants asked if they had a family member or close friend with disability only 23 (27.6 %) confirmed that they did. The vast majority of respondents (90%, N= 108) had not received any training focusing on the education of students with disabilities, while a large number (65%, N= 78) of them had not previously taught a student with disability. Lastly, almost half (45%) of the respondents (N= 54) had knowledge of the special education Act and the function of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers (KEDDY) (Table1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the demographics of the sample

Demographic Variable	Teacher groups	N	(%)	Mean	S.D.
		(n= 120)	100		
Gender	Male	48	40	3.12	1.06
	Female	72	60	3.21	1.12
Age	21-30	20	17	3.37	1.04
	31-40	33	33	3.43	1.27
	41-50	36	36	3.80	1.36
	51-60	17	14	3.24	1.17
Teaching level	Preschool education	48	40	3.14	1.28
	Primary education	72	60	3.82	1.20
Qualification level	Bachelor Degree	92	76	3.94	1.36
	Master Degree	28	22.3	2.96	1.07
	Doctoral Diploma (Phd)	2	1.6	1.00	1.01
Intimate contact with a person with a disability	yes	23	27.6	2.96	1.53
	no	97	72.4	3.99	1.23
Training on Special Education	yes	108	90	3.01	1.91
	no	12	10	2.55	1.33
Teaching experience in Special education	yes	42	35	3.11	1.85
	no	78	65	2.57	1.62
Knowledge of special education Act and the function of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers (KEDDY)	yes	54	45	3.44	1.27
	no	66	55	3.81	1.19

3.2 Factor analysis

In this study, the ATIES was re-examined in order to check the factor structure as well as to determine the reliability of the scale. The reliability analysis for the ATIES showed a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.85. The factor analysis of the ATIES revealed as it

was expected that the items of the Greek version of the scale are loading on four factors: Physical (0.72), Behavioural (0.62), Social (0.57) and Academic (0.73) inclusion (Table 2).

Table 2: Cronbach's a reliability analysis of the greek version of "ATIES"

Factor	Cronbach's a
Physical Inclusion	0.72
Behavioral Inclusion	0.69
Social Inclusion	0.57
Academic Inclusion	0.73

3.3 Descriptive Statistics for the factors of the Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Scale (ATIES)

Table 3 provides a profile of descriptive statistics for each of the four factors of the ATIES: (a) attitudes towards including students with physical disabilities, (b) attitudes towards including students with behavioural problems, (c) attitudes towards including students with social difficulties and (d) attitudes towards including students with academic difficulties. An overall mean score of the four factors was also computed to measure attitudes towards inclusion.

As it is shown, the mean and S.D. score for the factor "physical inclusion" were 3.35 and 1.50 respectively. The second factor of the scale which called "behavioural inclusion" had mean score 3.36 and S.D. score 1.10. The mean score for the third factor "social inclusion" was 4.45 and the S.D. was 1.14 whereas the last factor of the scale "academic inclusion" had mean score 3.84 and S.D. 1.41. The total mean score from the four factors was 3.75.

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations of the "ATIES" factors

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation
Physical Inclusion	3.35	1.50
Behavioral Inclusion	3.36	1.10
Social Inclusion	4.45	1.14
Academic Inclusion	3.84	1.41
Total	3.75	1.28

3.4 Demographic variables may affect teacher's attitudes toward Inclusive Education

In this study, the demographic factors which was examined whether or not affect each factor of teachers' attitudes toward inclusion were: gender, age, educational level, qualification level, previous training in special education, previous teaching experience in special education and perceived knowledge of the purpose of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers.

As regards the gender of the sample, a statistically significant difference was noticed in the second factor "behavioural inclusion" ($t = 2.420$, $df = 390$, $p = .021$, $p < 0.05$), in which women's attitudes ($M = 4.32$, $S. D. = 1.10$) were different from those of men ($M = 3.71$, $S.D. = 1.01$).

Regarding age, significant differences were observed for the "physical inclusion" factor ($F_{3, 377} = 6.195$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$) and "social inclusion" factor ($F_{3, 380} = 3.919$,

$p = 0.009$, $p < 0.05$). According to Scheffe-test, the results showed statistically significant differences between teachers in the 21-30 age group ($M. = 4.31$, $S. D. = 1.08$) and those in the 41-50 age group ($M. = 3.24$, $S. D. = 1.19$), also, between those in the 21-30 age group ($M. = 4.31$, $S. D. = 1.08$) and those in the over 51 age group ($M. = 2.98$, $S. D. = 1.10$) for "physical inclusion" factor. Post hoc analysis using Scheffe-test didn't show any statistical differences between groups for "social inclusion" factor.

When considering the level of education, statistically significant differences were found for all the factors: "physical inclusion" factor ($F 2, 388 = 6.868$, $p = 0.001$, $p < 0.01$), "behavioural inclusion" factor ($F 2, 375 = 9.490$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$), "social inclusion" factor ($F 2, 395 = 8.772$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$) and "academic inclusion" factor ($F 2, 338 = 8.772$, $p = 0.007$, $p < 0.01$). According to Scheffe-test, differences were observed between pre-school education ($M. = 3.5$, $S.D. = 1.20$) and primary education ($M. = 3.38$, $S.D. = 1.19$) for "physical inclusion" factor. Moreover, teachers' attitudes who were taught in pre-school education ($M. = 4.37$, $S.D. = 0.90$) were different from those who taught in primary education ($M. = 3.97$, $S.D. = 0.97$) regarding the "behavioural inclusion" factor. Statistical significant differences were also evident in the "social inclusion" factor between educators who were working in pre-school education ($M. = 4.97$, $S.D. = 0.76$) and those who were teaching in primary education ($M. = 4.65$, $S.D. = 0.84$). No statistically significant differences were found between primary and preschool teachers for the "academic inclusion" factor.

Additionally, regarding the qualification level of the educators, significant differences were found for the first factor. Particularly, attitudes of those who possess a bachelor degree ($M. = 3.71$, $S.D. = 1.34$) are statistically different from those who held no Master degree ($M. = 3.23$, $S.D. = 1.18$) for "physical inclusion" factor ($t = 2.110$, $df = 396$, $p = 0.035$, $p < 0.05$).

Significant differences were also evident in the mean scores of those teachers who had adequate training in special education and those who had not. More specifically, for the factor "physical inclusion" ($t = 2.887$, $df = 364$, $p = 0.004$, $p < 0.01$), teachers' attitudes who had undertaken qualified training on students with disabilities ($M. = 3.48$, $S.D. = 1.26$) are different from those who had not ($M. = 3.12$, $S.D. = 1.54$). In addition, as regards the factor "behavioural inclusion" ($t = 3.053$, $df = 325$, $p = 0.002$, $p < 0.01$) there were differences to the mean scores of those participants who had been trained in special education ($M. = 4.21$, $S. D. = 3.54$) and those who had not ($M. = 3.43$, $S. D. = 1.15$). Differences were also found to the "social inclusion" factor ($t = 3.718$, $df = 371.122$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.01$) between those teachers who had prior training in the field of special education ($M. = 4.15$, $S.D. = 0.91$) and those who had not ($M. = 4.21$, $S.D. = 1.12$). Similarly, differences were observed to the last factor "academic inclusion" ($t = 3.840$, $df = 251.890$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.01$) between participants who had been trained on educating students with SENs ($M. = 4.18$, $S. D. = 3.05$) and those who had not ($M. = 3.73$, $S. D. = 1.16$).

As regards prior teaching experience with students with SENs, significant differences were observed to the first three factors. Specifically, there was a difference between teachers who had teaching experience with students with disabilities ($M. =$

3.43, S.D. = 1.31) and those who had not (M.= 3.09, S.D. = 1.11) for the factor "physical inclusion" ($t = 3.782$, $df = 334$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.01$). Differences have been also existed between participants with prior teaching experience (M. = 4.12, S.D. = 0.86) and those without (M. = 3.69, S. D. = 1.49) for the "behavioural inclusion" factor ($t = 3.791$, $df = 333$, $p = 0.000$, $p < 0.01$). Mean differences were also found to the "social inclusion" factor ($t = 3.200$, $df = 268.005$, $p = 0.002$, $p < 0.01$) among teachers with previous teaching experience (M. = 4.67, S.D. = 0.94) and those who had not taught students with disabilities (M. = 4.32, S.D. = 1.25).

Regarding knowledge of the purpose of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers, statistically significant differences were observed for the "academic inclusion" factor ($t = 2.962$, $df = 367$, $p = 0.003$, $p < 0.001$). In particular, there is a difference between the teachers who possess knowledge of the purpose and the functioning of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers (M. = 3.42, S.D. = 1.13) and those who don't (M. = 4.01, S.D. = 1.52).

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The results of the present study revealed that the teachers of the sample tend to have more positive inclusive attitudes toward students with social difficulties rather than those with behavioral and academic difficulties, whereas they perceive students with physical disabilities are less possible to be supported in the general education schools. These findings seem to be in agreement with previous studies (Sharma, Ee & Desai, 2003; Bornman & Donohue, 2013) as teaching these types of students requires more preparation from teachers and a planning which will be adaptive to their needs.

As regards participant's gender, the survey showed that women were more favorable towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs than their men colleagues. This assumption is also found in other previous studies (Papadopoulou, Kokaridas, Papanikolaou & Patsiaouras, 2004; Romi & Leyser, 2006).

Moreover, younger teachers seem to have more positive views towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs. This result seem to be confirmed in other relevant surveys (Subban & Sharma, 2006; Gal, Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010) and may reveals that young educators are more aware and sensitized in inclusive education due to their recent graduation from their pedagogical department.

Furthermore, primary educators seemed to develop less positive attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs in general schools than their preschool colleagues, which were also observed in the study of Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou (2006).

In addition, previous training on special education (attending seminars on special education or special education courses) was found to affect teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as they seemed to be more willing to accept students with disabilities in mainstream classroom. In this case, the interesting is that this finding is not being confirmed by previous studies as their results were verified (Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010).

Regarding teaching experience, it is found that affects positively teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as teachers with greater teaching experience appeared to be more comfortable in teaching students with special educational needs. This result is consistent with other studies (Subban & Sharma, 2006; Batsiou, Bebetos, Panteli, & Antoniou, 2008; Forlin, Loreman, Sharma & Earle, 2009).

Additionally, teachers who had a master degree or a doctoral diploma (Phd) were less concerned about including students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms compared to those who possess a bachelor degree. Similar results were also found in the study of Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou (2014).

Furthermore, the awareness of the Special Education Act seemed to influence teachers' attitudes, reinforcing their sense of self-efficacy in order to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms which is consistent with the study of Subban & Sharma (2006).

Lastly, the knowledge of the purpose of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers has affected positively the attitudes of the participants towards the inclusion of students with SENs, as collaboration with special staff will be helpful to adopt a more effective teaching for those students in the regular classroom (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014).

4.1 Limitations of the study and implications for future research

In reviewing the findings from this study, readers should be aware of some important limitations. In this study, an important limitation was that the sample was not representative as it did not include secondary school teachers. Due to these limitations, the generalization of the findings is unsafe. Therefore, one recommendation for further research is to conduct the study into a larger number of teachers including secondary school teachers.

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