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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Feasibility of Inclusive Education in Greece: Current Challenges, Difficulties, and Opportunities

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### Abstract

Statements made by major governmental and non-governmental bodies and organizations (UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, and the World Bank), members of various governments, and during significant historical conferences (Dakar, 2000, Amman, 1996, and Jomtien, 1990) emphasized the importance of 'Education for All'. This is a message that reflects the spirit and philosophy of inclusive education, an education free of discrimination, barriers, limitations, and stigmatization; an education guided by respect, acceptance, solidarity, and understanding. The aim of this article is to introduce the concept of Inclusive Education, and to emphasize the significance of educational transformations and modifications to be made in order to promote and implement inclusive education in schools. In addition, the barriers and advantages/benefits are discussed, and inclusive policies and practices that contribute to the creation of a more democratic school are presented. According to the analysis of this topic, many important actions must be taken in order to achieve inclusive education in each school in Greece.

**Key-words:** inclusive education, disability, barriers, advantages/benefits, inclusive policies and practices, Greece.

## The Emergence of Inclusive Education

In 1990, a World Conference was held in Jomtien, Thailand, attended by approximately 1,500 delegates from 155 countries, and representatives from approximately 150 governmental, non-governmental, and intergovernmental organizations. This World Conference addresses the issue of 'Education For All' for the first time. All countries represented at this Conference were urged to ensure that all citizens receive an adequate basic education. All of these countries have signed the World Declaration on 'Education for All' and the Framework for Action on Meeting Basic Learning Needs. This Declaration states that every child, adolescent, and adult can benefit from educational opportunities that are designed to meet their basic learning needs. In this sense, 'Education for All' is a broader vision that includes programs, activities, and services from both the public and the private sector with a view to meeting the basic needs of all individuals.<sup>[1]</sup>

This Declaration remains a historic moment for every child, adolescent, and adult, as well as every family, because it has marked the beginning of laying new foundations for overcoming inequality and creating new opportunities, while combating the phenomenon of poverty. In the framework of this Declaration, special emphasis was placed on the right to basic education, the quality of education provided, and the meaningful learning outcomes obtained through it.<sup>[1]</sup>

Four years later, in 1994, the World Conference on Special Education was held in Salamanca, Spain, with over 300 participants, 92 governments, and 25 international organizations in attendance. This conference acknowledged the importance of including young people and adults with disabilities and/or special educational needs in the general education system. The Framework for Action on Special Education was also adopted so that governments and organizations could be guided by its spirit. It is worth noting that the Salamanca Statement marked a new beginning for millions of children who had been denied an education. It has offered an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to integrate special education into the larger context of the 'Education For All' movement. As a result, the importance of including all children of the world in all school units and of a significant reform of the school system has emerged. The most basic requirement of this conference is the change in policy and resources in the majority of countries around the world, the definition of the national goals, and the formation of a partnership between all parties involved, both at a national and an international level.<sup>[2]</sup>

Two years later, in 1996, approximately 250 organizations from 73 countries were gathered in Amman, Jordan. The aim of this meeting was to assess the goals that had been established and the progress that had been made.<sup>[1]</sup> The World Education Forum was held in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, in 2000. Participants in the forum pledged to take action to achieve the

goals and objectives of 'Education for All' by 2015.<sup>[1]</sup>

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development on Education was approved and signed by world leaders in 2015, mainly aiming at making education accessible to all and serving as a 'foundation' for sustainable development and peace. A specific purpose of the agenda was to ensure inclusive education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Inclusive Education: Concept and Content

The concept of inclusive education is described in various ways in literature. In Greece and Cyprus, 'inclusive education' refers primarily to integration, co-education, and uniform education.<sup>[3, 4]</sup> The term is associated with special education in the United States, Germany, Austria, and Sweden.<sup>[5, 6, 7]</sup> As a result, some researchers have identified a disagreement of view<sup>[8, 9, 10, 11]</sup> and tried to interpret it.

More specifically, Magnusson<sup>[12, p.678]</sup> argued that 'applications, interpretations, and definitions of the concept [inclusive education] vary greatly in both research and practice, between and even within countries'.<sup>[13]</sup> Greek researchers, such as Yota Karagianni and Minas Efstathiou, hold a similar viewpoint. According to Karagianni<sup>[14, p.73]</sup>, how one interprets the concept of 'inclusive education' depends on one's ontological position as well as the country or countries studied in. Efstathiou<sup>[15, p.128]</sup>, on the

other hand, contends that the ambiguity of a commonly accepted performance of the term and the confusion it causes eventually 'lead us to strip the terms that are frequently used in relation to inclusive education, both at the level of policy formulation and at the level of practice.'

However, the term 'inclusion' emphasizes the effort to overcome factors that act as barriers to participation in the educational process, such as nationality, race, social status, disability, or course progress, and is a never-ending process of transformation of both structure content and educational approaches.<sup>[16]</sup> Inclusive education is the process of continuously strengthening the capacity of the educational system to respond to the various educational needs of the student body<sup>[2]</sup>, and to provide higher-quality learning for all.<sup>[16]</sup>

According to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>[17]</sup>, modern sustainable schools must play a catalytic role in promoting free, equal, and quality education, with opportunities for all and no exclusions, with the view to creating a society that inspires safety, acceptance, and cooperation. All these are fundamental philosophical principles of the 'inclusive education' pedagogical movement.<sup>[16]</sup>

In some countries, inclusive education is still seen as a method of serving children with disabilities and/or special educational needs within general education, but, from a philosophical point of view, inclusive

education means accepting student diversity in all of its forms, and recognizing the needs that arise in each case.<sup>[18]</sup> In other words, inclusion is founded on democratic and social justice principles, promoting a 'School for All', which is free of discrimination, barriers, difficulties, and obstacles.<sup>[19, 20]</sup> The aim of inclusive education is to readjust the educational system through a series of measures and specialized strategies in order to meet the needs of each student.<sup>[21]</sup>

Inclusion raises the issue of how a school is organized and how it can change and truly adapt to the needs of individuals who are diverse or have disabilities and/or special educational needs.<sup>[22]</sup> The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to significantly contribute to the development of students with diversity or disabilities and/or special educational needs through specific practices that recognize their wholeness, rather than to make them change.<sup>[23]</sup> Through an inclusive philosophy, the teacher's goal is not only to focus on his or her student's weaknesses, but also on his or her abilities.<sup>[24]</sup>

In short, all of the above is summarized in a review of the research literature published by Göransson and Nilholm<sup>[25]</sup>, who state that inclusion can be understood in three ways: (1) Inclusion as a placement (for example, the education of pupils with diversity or disabilities and/or special educational needs in a general education classroom), (2) Inclusion as meeting to the learning and social needs of all students with and without disabilities and/or special educational needs, and (3) Inclusion as a means of creating

communities with specific elements, such as democracy, social justice, acceptance, and so on.

### **Inclusive Education in Greece**

In Greece, provision for the education of pupils with disabilities and/or special educational needs has existed for over a century. Today, the practical implementation of inclusive education of the Greek educational system is far from theoretical acceptance, and the formation of a uniform and quality education for all does not correspond to the Greek educational reality.

According to the current Special Education Law (Law 3699/2008)<sup>[26]</sup>, students with disabilities and/or special educational needs may attend (a) a general school class with educational-pedagogical support provided by the class teacher. This type of education is for pupils with mild learning difficulties, (b) a typical general school class with the provision of coordinated and combined support by a general and special education teacher (co-teaching) within the Institution of Parallel Support, and (c) specially organized and appropriately staffed integration classes that operate within general education schools, with attendance of a common, and also a specialized individualized (up to 15 hours per week) or group program, (d) special education schools designed for pupils with severe disabilities.

Based on the above, the Institution of Parallel Support and integration classes are the only educational models of school

inclusion in the Greek educational reality; Parallel Support Institution is a type of individualized, special education provision that is implemented within the general education classroom<sup>[27]</sup>, and is only available to students who have disability and/or special educational needs. For the integration classes, they lead to segregation and exclusion of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs from general education classes<sup>[28]</sup>, since the special education teacher of the integration class is almost entirely responsible for the support of the students with disabilities and/or special educational needs.<sup>[29]</sup>

### Purpose of the Article

Despite the fact that there is an abundance of research and theoretical literature on inclusive education, this article is an intriguing endeavor, as it focuses on critical issues concerning this topic. As a result, the purpose of this theoretical article is to investigate whether inclusive education is practiced in Greece through a review of Greek and international scientific literature.

In addition, the following questions are addressed in this article:

- What are the barriers to the implementation of inclusive education in Greece?
- What are the advantages/ benefits of inclusive education?
- What inclusive policies and practices might be implemented?

### Inclusive Education: Challenges and Limitations

Various international policies, such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>[2]</sup> and the UNESCO 'Education for All' initiative<sup>[30]</sup> have emphasized the importance of providing equitable learning experiences for all students, regardless of differences. Despite the fact that many countries have the best (policy) intentions<sup>[31]</sup>, it appears that a large proportion of schools and universities fail to properly address equitable access, particularly for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs<sup>[32]</sup>, owing to a lack of resources.<sup>[31]</sup>

According to Soulis<sup>[33]</sup>, the main barriers to the implementation of inclusive education in Greek public schools are a lack of educational and specialized staff, a general school curriculum that is primarily knowledge-centered<sup>[34]</sup>, a lack of logistical infrastructure and modern equipment, significant difficulties in coordinating school with other important structures under the Ministry of Education.

Parallel Support Institution, integration classes, and special schools serve students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. The decision to study in one of these structures is based on an interdisciplinary evaluation carried out by KEDASY (in Greek) [Centers for Diagnosis, Evaluation, Counseling, and Support] designed for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. There are specific

diagnostic categories of students who can study in a Parallel Support Institution, depending on the degree of functionality of their disability. This is a significant barrier to inclusion, because attendance at a general education school with Parallel Support Institution is conditional.<sup>[28]</sup> The fact that inclusion is applied to specific groups of students under certain conditions creates inequalities and segregation within the school.

Despite the increased proportions of students in Parallel Support Institution, special schools, and integration classes in recent years<sup>[35, 36, 37, 38]</sup>, it appears that the necessary recruitment of special educators and specialized staff, particularly in Parallel Support, is not implemented. Unfortunately, recruitment in special education schools appears to be beyond schedule. Late recruitment has been shown to have a negative impact on both the teacher and the student performance. The Greek state effectively divided students into two groups: 'privileged' students, who were supported from the outset, and "non-privileged" students, who were supported later in the school year.<sup>[35]</sup> Recruitment policies in Greece for special education teachers in the Parallel Support Institution require fundamental changes in organization and funding in order to meet the needs of students and signal a strike against ableism. Despite the recruitment of several special education teachers in previous years in Greece, the problem remains unresolved. As a result, it is critical that all schools employ additional

permanent teaching and specialized personnel.<sup>[38, 39]</sup>

The curriculum for primary and secondary education is a major impediment to the implementation of inclusive education. The curricula for these grades remain the same, resulting in no differentiation between students based on the unique characteristics that each of them possesses.<sup>[40]</sup> As a result, curricula should be designed with the unique nature of each child as the primary criterion, rather than age group homogeneity.<sup>[41]</sup> Given that children's development 'is a linear, predictable, and prescribed process'<sup>[42, 43]</sup>, it is critical that those who are responsible for developing curricula understand that education is not a system that produces predetermined knowledge, abilities, and values. Curricula are thought to need to shift away from the promotion of standardized learning and teaching, which results in knowledge-centeredness.<sup>[33]</sup> Excessive emphasis on literacy, as well as testing and grading should be avoided, because they do not benefit students. Rather, they hope to instill 'discipline and differentiation in students by immersing them in a literacy skills centered world, where human abilities can be calculated and compared'.<sup>[44]</sup>

A barrier in a general education school is also the way a classroom is structured. The desks, walls, play and work corners of children in kindergartens are organized in such a way that they give the impression of greater obedience, discipline, control, and restriction of all children's movements.<sup>[42]</sup> For example,

primary and secondary school desks are designed for frontal instruction, making it difficult for a hard-of-hearing or D/deaf student to follow the teacher. Even students with mobility difficulties struggle to get into the classroom. This fact has a significant impact on the educational experience, social development, and identity formation of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs.<sup>[45]</sup>

According to various studies, most school buildings in general and most school classrooms in particular are deemed unsuitable in Greece. A survey conducted in 12 prefectures of Greece, for example, showed that only 98 of 510 integration classes were suitable for teaching.<sup>[46]</sup> According to another study conducted by Papadopoulou<sup>[47]</sup>, the building design and infrastructure of schools in the Attica region are inappropriate and exclude both students and teachers. Kassandrinou<sup>[48]</sup> discovered serious accessibility problems for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs in her study, which was conducted during the school year 2010-2011 in 166 general primary schools with an integration class in East and West Thessaloniki.

Significant challenges can also be found in the way teaching is performed in Greek public schools. According to Hattie<sup>[49]</sup>, the strongest variable influencing the quality of learning, particularly in school education, is the quality of teaching. Due to a lack of knowledge about which teaching strategies and approaches benefit students, many teachers use teacher-centered approach in

particular, which has the effect of making the lesson boring and not responding to the needs and interests of the students, creating a kind of exclusion from the learning process for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. To put it another way, teacher-centered teaching 'functions as a process, in which the teacher deposits information in the heads of the students'.<sup>[50]</sup> Even teachers avoid the process of reflecting on and implementing new innovative ideas and approaches in their classrooms for fear of doing something wrong or receiving negative feedback from the students or the school administration as a result of complaints made by parents and guardians of students with and without disabilities and/or special educational needs.<sup>[20]</sup>

Among the most fundamental barriers are teachers' attitudes and perceptions about disability and educational inclusion of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Their attitudes and perceptions appear positive at times, negative at others, and neutral at others. Many general education teachers request that students with disabilities and/or special educational needs be separated from the general education classroom in another classroom by special education teachers because, their 'negative' behavior disrupts the lesson.<sup>[3]</sup> As a result, such school cultures foster exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs<sup>[24, 3]</sup>, as well as shape negatively disabled students' identities.<sup>[24]</sup>

According to research<sup>[51, 52, 53]</sup>, the special education teacher plays an important and positive role in the general education school. This is the reason why collaboration between general and special education teachers is critical to promoting inclusion.<sup>[31]</sup> However, none of the international co-teaching models found in literature are used in Greece.<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, the role of the special education teacher in the Greek public school is primarily auxiliary/supportive, rather than equal.<sup>[54, 55, 56, 57, 3, 29]</sup> As Vlachou<sup>[57, p.54]</sup> argues, today's educational system 'divides teachers in the same way that it isolates and categorizes students.

Finally, the current legislative framework for the school-family-society cooperation is one of the most significant barriers to the implementation of the inclusive philosophy.<sup>[58]</sup> The current legislative framework appears to favor the role of the passive rather than the active parent in school activities. This has the effect of creating an unequal relationship between parents and teachers, manifesting itself as rivalry, underestimation, and degradation of the methods implemented by the teacher in his/her classroom and while parents, particularly those of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs, have high demands/expectations of them. This can lead teachers to have increased stress and feelings of ineffectiveness in the classroom.

In summary, according to Kochhar, West, and Taymans<sup>[59]</sup>, the barriers to inclusive education are classified into three major categories. The first category includes

organizational difficulties, which are defined as school leaders being forced to follow laws imposed on them, as a result of which they move away from inclusive educational processes. The second category refers to teacher training, which is required for the development of better inclusive methods and practices, while the third one is concerned with teachers' attitudes and perceptions of inclusive education.

### Benefits of Inclusive Education

The benefits of inclusive education for all individuals involved have been highlighted in the international and Greek literature. First, when teachers receive ongoing training on disability issues and the education of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs, they have more positive attitudes toward the inclusion of these children. When teachers receive significant support from the management of the school and have a good cooperative relationship with the children's parents, they actually experience professional development, increased personal satisfaction, and a better self-perception of themselves.<sup>[60]</sup>

The advantages of inclusion for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs are numerous. It specifically helps them to develop their cognitive, social, behavioral, and emotional skills.<sup>[61, 62, 63]</sup> For example, Cole, Murphy, Frisby, Grossi, and Bolte<sup>[64]</sup> discovered that students who spent 80% or more of their time in a general education classroom outperformed their peers who spent more time in separate special education classes in



both reading and math assessment. It is also worth noting that, according to a meta-analysis published by Kefallinou, Symeonidou, and Meijer<sup>[65]</sup>, long-term benefits of inclusion result in higher chances of continuing higher education studies or finding paid work when compared to students with disabilities and/or special educational needs educated in special education schools. Furthermore, inclusion provides these students with a sense of 'belonging' and significantly reduces their reliance on their parents or guardians.<sup>[66]</sup>

The benefits of inclusion for students without disabilities and/or special educational needs focus on increased understanding and acceptance of their classmates' disabilities, as well as increased interest in and solidarity with those students with disabilities and/or special educational needs.<sup>[67, 68, 69, 70]</sup>

### Inclusive Policies and Practices

To be meaningful, inclusive practices must focus on the state, the school, and the classroom.<sup>[71,72]</sup> Similarly, Ware<sup>[73]</sup> believes that in order to achieve a more inclusive education, policy-driven changes and definitions of school effectiveness, structural changes to the school environment and curriculum, and changing the values and cultural systems of society and all schools must be prioritized.

As previously stated, current educational policy promotes a divisive philosophy and a philosophy of homogeneity<sup>[33, 74]</sup>, a philosophy 'mediated by

the methodologies of division and differentiation [...] and exclusion at the same time'.<sup>[44]</sup> As a result, the current education system requires reform through a stronger education policy that recognizes the vision and philosophy of inclusive education. Existing problems such as segregation, marginalization, and stigmatization are exacerbated as long as this policy remains. According to Genova<sup>[75]</sup>, the more incomplete an educational system is, the more likely it is to have a negative impact on the implementation of inclusive education. This implies that some fundamental and necessary actions must be taken, such as the development and promotion of appropriate teaching materials oriented to the real needs and interests of pupils with disabilities and/or special educational needs, the restructuring of curriculum centered on the diversity of the children and with a focus on the development of imagination, creativity, and critical thinking rather than simply the assimilation and memorization of knowledge, which is frequently unnecessary<sup>[76]</sup>, the promotion of theoretical and practical training for all teachers in issues of disability, inclusion, Differentiated Instruction, Universal Design, Universal Design for Learning, Response to Intervention, Neuroeducation, Co-teaching practices, print and digital teaching materials creation, and use of instructional and assistive technology.

Despite the fact that at the legislative level the state has established basic rules for the implementation of accessibility for individuals with disabilities and/or special educational needs, it appears that they are

not implemented, resulting in significant barriers to the participation of these students in all school and social activities.<sup>[48]</sup> As a result, substantial reconstruction of the building infrastructure of the schools is required, i.e., suitable space for individuals with motor, sensory, and developmental disabilities<sup>[77]</sup>, such as ramps, toilets specially designed for individuals with motor disabilities, sensory integration rooms for all students with disabilities, technology suitable for enhancing the accessibility of D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students, such as speech-to-text system. There is also a lack of state funding and a unified central planning for the upkeep and construction of new modern, suitable, friendly, and accessible school buildings for all students.<sup>[78]</sup> This is why adequate funding and the establishment of a more unified central planning for the construction of these buildings are required.

D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students who communicate primarily in Greek Sign Language in their home environment 'are forced to change their language code at school, resulting in a cultural break with their familiar environment and, ultimately, suspension of their potential for school success'.<sup>[50]</sup> Since Greek Sign Language was officially recognized by the state as the official language of D/deaf and hard-of-hearing students on September 7, 2017, sign language must be included as a mandatory or optional lesson in all schools and universities throughout Greece. Learning sign language allows hearing people to interact with D/deaf and hard-of-hearing people. As a result, it is deemed necessary to staff general education

schools and universities with special education teachers who have completed sign language studies, or with sign language interpreters.<sup>[71]</sup>

Similar steps must be taken to assist the individuals with visual disability. Many textbooks could be made digitally available for these students. These textbooks, in particular, should be simplified to avoid confusion, should have the ability to be enlarged by the student with visual disability, and, of course, the possibility of auditory discrimination through content pronunciation.

Kontoleon and Deropoulou-Derou<sup>[79]</sup> emphasize that the training of both special and general education teachers plays a critical role in shaping positive attitudes toward inclusion and increasing the level of optimism and self-confidence in the dynamic effort of teachers to successfully respond to the diversity of the student population. Teachers should be aware of effective instructional practices that benefit the entire class, as well as methods that promote the inclusion of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Adopting more student-centered approaches is very important and beneficial for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs<sup>[31, 80]</sup>, such as co-operative teaching, the project method, and experiential teaching, emphasizing creative and free expression, taking initiatives, solving problems, developing team spirit, and so on. Through inclusion, general and special education teachers will coordinate their efforts, co-teach, and share classroom design and management in order to achieve the

successful outcome of the goals set for all students in general education classes, with or without disabilities and/or special educational needs. The more general and special education teachers collaborate in education, the more they will perceive and recognize the supportive role of special education teachers in the education of all students.<sup>[3]</sup> Inclusive education allows teachers to collaborate, face challenges in the classroom together, and shape effective teaching for all students. Teacher education can help to understand and change teachers' attitudes not only in an educational context, but also in a broader social context.<sup>[81]</sup>

Also, the support of teachers by the director or head of the school is valued. The head of the school must create an inclusive school climate and promote innovation and change in the school through a variety of actions that involve all stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and the community. School managers should encourage teachers to teach children in informal learning environments, which have been shown to benefit all students. Learning is an ever-evolving process, which means it occurs everywhere, including outside the classroom. Children need to express themselves, to use all of their senses, and most importantly, to interact with their surroundings and feel as many emotions as possible.<sup>[50, 82]</sup> The child shapes his/her identity not only in the classroom, but also in an informal learning environment. Gaining as much experience as possible in informal learning environments can have a significant impact on the holistic development of

children with and without disabilities and/or special educational needs.

Finally, it is true that many general education schools employ psychologists and social workers. However, this is insufficient. As a result, it is believed that hiring other specialties in general education schools, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and special physical education trainers, is critical in order to implement inclusive education and avoid further institutionalization of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs through special schools. These specialties will work together to provide effective education and treatment to students with disabilities and/or special educational needs, based on their needs and difficulties.

Therefore, a strong reform is required. Inclusive policies and practices must be improved in order to positively respond to the diversity of all students, viewing individual differences as opportunities to enrich learning rather than problems to be solved.<sup>[18]</sup>

### **Wishing for a better educational future**

All of the flaws discovered in the Greek education system demonstrate that the recent memorandum policy has had a negative impact on it<sup>[50, 83]</sup> and were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation is mirrored not only in Greece, but also globally.<sup>[84, 85, 86, 87, 88]</sup> Insufficient financial and human resources, as well as different policy interpretations make inclusive education difficult to happen.

However, it is known that the educational systems of other countries have successfully implemented inclusive education and social justice principles (for example, that of Finland, New Zealand, Italy, and other important countries).<sup>[89, 90, 91, 92]</sup> According to Pasi Sahlberg<sup>[93]</sup>, 'the greater the equality in an educational system, the more likely it is to redress greater social and economic

inequalities'. Respect for and acceptance of the diversity, as well as equality for all are instilled in such educational systems.<sup>[18]</sup> Greece should follow the example of these countries. More actions and efforts are required in order for the social justice and the inclusive education for children with and without disabilities and/or special educational needs to be promoted.

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