

Scientific Bulletin of Chełm
Section of Pedagogy
No. 1/2020

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION ON THE BACKGROUNDS OF GREEK SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT: *The relevance of the problem under consideration is that the inclusion phenomenon in Greece, as an expression of every child's right to educational equality, remains an important moral and political issue that needs to be addressed further. Greece, like most European countries, has followed the principles of the Salamanca Declaration. The feature of inclusive education is the willingness of teachers to accept students with special educational needs. Their attitudes and knowledge about inclusive education are important, as they are indicators of such willingness. The aim of this article is to study teachers' perceptions of inclusive education on the background of Greek schools.*

KEY WORDS: *inclusion, educational quality, teachers' perceptions, special needs.*

INTRODUCTION

Previous research in the field of inclusive education links demographic and parametric variables with teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education [Avramidis, Norwich, p. 129]. The research of Center and Ward (1987) emphasizes that despite the fact that teachers agree with the principles of inclusive education, when asked if they want to work with children with special educational needs, their answer focuses on children with mild difficulties [Padeliadou, Lambropoulou].

Variables such as the teachers' gender, age, level of specialization in special education, severity of student disability have been considered as factors that can shape teachers' attitude towards the co-education of students with special educational needs [Avramidis, Norwich, p. 130, Mazur, Miterka].

Older, more experienced teachers seem to encourage less positive attitudes than younger teachers. In addition, the lack of training in the field of inclusive education or special education may lead to a less positive attitude towards the inclusive education of students with disabilities in key environments.

Another reported variable refers to the perception of teachers' confidence. Teachers who consider themselves satisfied enough to include students with disabilities seem to have a more positive attitude towards inclusive education [Avramidis, Norwich, p. 135]. In addition, previous experience with students with disabilities can allow the teacher to view inclusive educational practices more positively [Avramidis, Norwich, p. 142]. However, the nature of such an experience can change perceptions. Negative perceptions are considered as reinforcing negative perceptions, as positive experiences lead to more favorable perceptions.

DISCUSSION

Inclusive education is a relatively new form of educational support for people with disabilities. Its main features are that children with and without special needs coexist in the same schools, in the same classrooms with all their peers, participating in the teaching process according to their abilities and needs. In this context, the support of all students is attempted, regardless of cognitive,

cultural or other peculiarities and the phenomena of removal, marginalization and negative social perceptions and opinions are limited.

Teachers find integrating students with disabilities into regular classes difficult and stressful. The need to work with special education teachers has led to tension and confusion. In addition, the integration of students with disabilities into standard classrooms is considered by some teachers to increase workload. In addition, teachers seem to be concerned about the non-acceptance of such students by their typical development peers. There are also fears that dynamics in inclusive environments may affect the academic progress of students without disabilities.

In the research of Chiner and Cardona teachers agreed on the concept of integration. They believe that teaching all students in regular classes, including those with special educational needs, has more advantages than disadvantages and that this practice promotes the development of tolerance and respect among students. They also considered it unfair to separate students with special educational needs from the rest of their classmates. However, they were reluctant to include students with moderate to severe disabilities in regular classes, and the idea of inclusion was difficult to achieve in secondary education [Chiner, Cardona, p. 529].

In order to manage integration in a responsible way, they also considered that other professionals (e.g. special education teachers and school psychologists) should assist general education teachers in their work. These findings are consistent with previous research [Avramidis, Norwich, p. 129; Mock, Kauffman, p. 209] showing that teachers support inclusion and are willing to include students with disabilities in classrooms [Avramidis, Norwich; Cardona; Mock, Kauffman]. However, according to these previous studies, the results also showed that acceptance of participation by teachers decreased when the conditions under which integration is implemented are not favorable (e.g. lack of time and support).

Some of the barriers identified in the study by Chiner and Cardona as barriers that may prevent accepting teachers' participation in a more responsible way seem to be beyond the classroom level. In particular, these barriers concern teachers' skills, resources and support. The findings revealed that the respondents realized that they did not have sufficient readiness or time, material resources and personal support to adequately meet the special needs

of their students [Chiner, Cardona, p. 541]. Scientists felt inadequate to teach all their students in the classroom and thought they did not have enough tools and support to meet the new integration requirements. This finding is supported by Khochen and Radford, Horne and Timmons and Idol who concluded that teachers felt that the initial and in-service training they received was not enough to address their classroom's diversity. This is not surprising, given that higher education and in-service training programs do not focus on preparing general education teachers to work with students with special educational needs.

Participants' perceptions of integration did not differ significantly based on years of teaching and gender. Compared to other studies, there are inconsistent results in these areas of interest. While the studies of scientists show that «neither gender nor teaching experience are strong predictors of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education; however in a study conducted in Spain, found that inexperienced teachers reported greater agreement on the benefits of inclusion, as well as significantly higher levels of cooperation, which is one of the preconditions for successful integration» [Avramidis, Norwich, p.129].

The obvious benefits of inclusive education and regardless of teachers' commitment and positive attitudes, and despite having the knowledge and skills needed to meet the educational needs of different students with disabilities, teachers are concerned for the academic, social and behavioral adaptation of students with disabilities in general classrooms. Some educators felt that «inclusion would offer little benefit to students with disabilities and therefore questioned the benefits of inclusive education» [Heiman, p.179; Priestley, Rabiee, p. 390]. Other teachers expressed concern that «as more students are involved, teachers will need additional tools and skills to address the social and emotional problems that accompany inclusive school education» [Idol, p. 91]. Vaughn et al. reported various aspects that may cause teachers to object to inclusive education, such as «the large number of students in the classroom, the lack of budget, the workload of teachers, the difficulties of standardized assessment. However, others noted a lack of teamwork or sought guidance in dealing with students with disabilities» [Danne, Beirne-Smith, p. 121]. Some of the main teachers claimed that they had chosen to teach a specific subject and not special education and that the integration policy forced them to enter areas they did not want or were not interested in [Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, Samuell, p. 98]. Mock

and Kauffman report: «on one hand, teachers can not be prepared to respond to the unique educational needs of each student with special needs and, on the other hand, special needs could function beyond their education and specialization» [Mock, Kauffman, p. 204].

Cushner, McClelland and Safford suggest that «the successful implementation of integration policies depends to a large extent on their acceptance by teachers. Therefore, teachers' perceptions of inclusive education need to be assessed in an effort to improve deficiencies in the education system that negatively affect their perceptions and attitudes. Integration involves hosting the learning environment and curriculum to meet the needs of all students and ensuring that all students belong to a community» [Cushner, McClelland, Safford, p. 141]. Unfortunately, many teachers have reservations about inclusive education and the idea of supporting of students with disabilities in the general classroom. According to Shade and Stewart, «one of the main factors influencing the successful implementation of any participation policy is the positive attitude of teachers. Teachers' acceptance of integration policy may affect their commitment to its implementation» [Bradshaw, p. 9].

Over the years, research on inclusive education has yielded a variety of results. Studies by Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden show that attitudes toward inclusive education are strongly influenced by the nature of disabilities. In contrast, Blackman, Conrad, and Brown found that teachers were positive to include only those children whose characteristics were unlikely to require additional teaching or managerial skills on the part of the teacher. Danne and Safford, conclude that over the last 10 years there has been some change in attitude, partly as a result of teachers experiencing work with students with disabilities [Danne, Beirne-Smith, p. 121]. Although it is important to assess teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, it is even more crucial to identify the factors that influence these perceptions, as these factors are an obstacle to the success of any participatory education program.

In inclusive education programs, an important element is the cooperation of both teachers with each other and with the students. As far as children with special educational needs are concerned, their co-education is related to the collective responsibility of the whole school community and not only of the class teacher or the special education teacher.

The separation of the roles of teachers and the cooperation between teachers within the school community can affect the co-education of children either positively, which is desirable or negatively. When there is a clear distribution of roles but also a proper and responsible cooperation of all the specialties that exist in the school community, then the co-education program will be implemented and achieved, while on the contrary if all this does not exist nothing will be done successfully and the child with special educational needs will be harmed. This fact was observed through a research conducted in France on teachers working in S.E. schools. Unclear separation of roles was observed, and as a result the co-education program was not properly functioning and on the other hand there was strong concern on the part of parents about the effectiveness of this program.

Regarding the cooperation between teachers and students in the context of S.E., teachers should have discussions with students so that they do not distinguish their classmate due to his cognitive, behavioral or even external differences. Also, another responsibility of the teacher is to recognize the achievements of the child with peculiarities in obvious ways.

According to Avramidis and Kalyva Greek teachers are traditionally skeptical about the inclusion of children with serious special educational needs [Avramidis, Norwich, p. 129]. For example, an early study by Padelidou and Lambropoulou showed that general education teachers had a neutral attitude towards integration, but had more positive attitudes than special education teachers [Padelidou, Lambropoulou, p. 179]. Another study by Chiner and Cardona found that general education teachers had negative attitudes toward the inclusion of children with deafness, blindness, severe behavioral problems and mild mental retardation [Chiner, Cardona, p. 534]. While acknowledging that integration could potentially enhance the social skills of these children, they disagreed with the widespread implementation of the policy until adequate resources were created and appropriate training provided.

Similar concerns were raised in another national study that explored Greek teachers' beliefs about children with disabilities and their inclusion in normal settings. Although the majority of teachers surveyed believe that children with disabilities could be educated in a normal school environment, they also consider that «special schools are important as a means of providing safe and protective shelter to children with disabilities» [Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, Samuel,

p. 107]. According to previous research, the degree of acceptance of children with disabilities by teachers depended to a large extent on the nature and severity of the disability. In particular, they were more willing to accept visually impaired children in their classrooms than mentally retarded children, deaf children and children with hearing problems. Children with multiple disabilities were less likely to be admitted.

Teachers' responses were also significantly related to the existence of previous teaching experience with students with disabilities, while those who had such experience reported more positive attitudes towards integration than their peers. Nevertheless, the majority of participants considered that the responsibility for the implementation of integration lies with the specialized staff (i.e. special educators and psychologists) who possess the necessary knowledge and educational skills to teach effectively to children with complex needs. But the role of teachers in inclusive education-co-education programs is very important and great as the teacher is the lever to mobilize such a program. The success or failure of the program depends on him. The achievement of the program requires common goals and plans and new methods of cooperation, something that has not happened much until today. This requires both general education teachers and special education teachers to acquire new skills in areas such as organization, counseling and communication, skills that in themselves require continuous improvement of teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

Collective studies show that the successful implementation of inclusive education is widely regarded by Greek teachers as dependent on the provision of professional development courses to general education staff, the availability of expert support and the generous funding of schools. The attitude of the teacher towards the integration of students with disabilities in the general classrooms has been influenced by the severity of the disability experienced by the students. The inclusion of students with behavioral and emotional disorders seemed to attract less favorable responses from general education teachers.

Therefore, educators involved in the general education system have been concerned about meeting the individual needs of students with disabilities, the risk of social symptoms associated with these students in inclusive

environments, the availability of resources for implementation, the level of preparedness faced by teachers through training, access to funding to support students with disabilities under general arrangements and the perceived lack of support from school administrators to support programs without exclusions.

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