

## TEACHING EXCELLENCE AS A PREREQUISITE OF INCLUSION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF FACTORS THAT GUARANTEE SOCIAL INCLUSION

DOI: 10.26341/issn.2241-4002-2024-2a-5-T02107

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### **Abstract**

*The inclusion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities has not been achieved so far, since the existing policies are inadequate in providing quality and equal education to all children without exception. The influence of the various disability models, which in turn had a great impact on the respective education policies, has been fragmentary, discontinuous and could not in isolation achieve these children's inclusion.*

*Qualitative analysis of 20 interviews with experts and special educational professionals revealed that five intercorrelated factors emerged as the most important quality elements and essential assessment criteria as far as educational and social inclusion was concerned.*

*Participants in this three year longitudinal study stated that the most crucial predictor of social inclusion was teaching excellence followed by effective leadership, teachers' education and continuous training, the implementation of the social model of disability and the principles of inclusive education, as well as the implementation of the medical model in education.*

*This study proposes that policy makers should take into consideration all the above factors, whose dynamic combination can contribute to the social inclusion of students.*

**Key words:** *Quality, Inclusive Education, Social Inclusion, Special Educational Needs And Disabilities*

## **1. Introduction**

Durin recent years, there have been so many changes in the field of education, which have also affected Special Education and Training, emphasizing the review of the way of approaching people with special needs and ensuring their right to equal access to knowledge and employment.

According to statistics<sup>1</sup>, the total number of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/A) in Greek public schools during the 2018-19 school year amounted to 6.3% (90,743 students) compared to the general total (1,429,147 students). The above finding is making even more imperative the need to provide a fair, equitable and quality education, that will ensure their successful inclusion into society.

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<sup>1</sup> European Agency of Special Needs Education-Greece, 2020. Retrieved 2021 from <https://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/EASIE-2019-2020-cross-country-report>

Quality education has been the subject of discussions and reflections of many international organizations and European Union states, which have implemented corresponding policies to ensure it. According to the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development "2030" (UN, 2015), all countries were asked to ensure free, equitable and quality education by promoting opportunities for lifelong learning (Goal 4, of the Sustainable Development Goals Development). The global education community adopted the Education 2030 Framework for Action to further pursue the goals of inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2015).

As far as the Greek area is concerned, in the updated "Greece Forward<sup>2</sup>" reform program (2021), interventions regarding education aim to upgrade the quality of the education provided and to create reliable learning and employment prospects for pupils, students and trainees.

In both general and special education, methods and procedures have been developed to ensure the quality of educational programs and procedures. There have been significant efforts, by many countries, to review and change policies and legislation regarding inclusive education, based on the implementation of new laws in relation to quality systems and evaluation of education. For this reason, many tools have been developed, based on corresponding quality indicators, which can be applied at national and European level to ensure the quality implementation of inclusive education.

Furthermore, the various policies that have been developed over time for the education of people with SEN/A have been based on the two main models of disability, the medical and the social. Although the medical model received a lot of criticism, it nevertheless exerted a big influence on the education of people with disabilities, since it formed the basis for the development of a wide range of educational strategies and methods in special education, which are based on a biological-psychological perspective, that emphasizes the importance of teaching processes, that promote appropriate sensory stimulation and perceptual organization (Massoumeh & Leila, 2012).

On the other hand, according to the social model of disability, the principle of inclusion in education was adopted as a right for equal participation of students with SEN/A in the educational process, through the provision of quality education. Thus, inclusive education was proposed as the creation of "a school for all", which would respect diversity and meet the needs of all children (Zoniou - Sideri et al., 2012; Markantoni, 2016).

However, according to the researchers, the use of a single model is not sufficient to effectively approach the complexity of disability, which reflects the interaction of both the individual characteristics of people with special needs and society. It is therefore considered necessary to implement a synthetic, multidimensional model, which will integrate all the above features and ensure the qualitative and equal participation of people with disabilities in education, as a basic condition for their social inclusion

(Norwich, 2002; Peters et al, 2005; Mitra, 2006; Samaha, 2007; Reindal, 2009; Smart, 2009; E.S.A.meA ., 2023; Levitt, 2017; Rudnick, 2017).

## **2. Research approach**

The objective of this research is the emergence of quality factors and criteria regarding education and social inclusion of students with disabilities and special educational needs, as they arise from the attitudes of the respondents.

Interviews were conducted with 20 people, teachers and specialties of primary special education and training, aiming at a more holistic understanding of the respondents' attitudes

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.government.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ethniko\\_sxedio\\_metarithmiseon.pdf](https://www.government.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ethniko_sxedio_metarithmiseon.pdf)

and investigation of their experiences as well as the subjective meanings that make them up, regarding the realistic quality criteria, related to the inclusion of students with disabilities and special educational needs, as well as the educational processes and methodologies, which are associated with more favorable inclusion.

The qualitative survey took place in the period from December 2022 to April 2023.

### **3. Findings - Discussion**

According to the qualitative results, several categories emerged, through the coding of the interviews, which were grouped into five main thematic axes, that are presented in the following Table.

*Table 1: Thematic axes of the interviews*

A. Effective teaching approaches in Special Education
B. School leadership and management
C. Social model of disability - Inclusive education
D. Education - Professional development of teachers
E. Implementing the principles of medical model in education

#### **3.1 Effective teaching approaches in Special Education**

“Effective teaching approaches in Special Education” was the most common factor of “quality”, according to nearly all the participants. Particularly, they referred to different approaches, teaching methods and principles, which derive both from the application of the medical model in education (*individualized approach, the behavioral one, supportive teaching, new therapeutic approaches, programs of specialization and continuous training in special education, appropriate material and technical infrastructure, supervisory means and teaching material - adapted to the needs of the students*) and the principles of inclusive education (*inclusive, participatory education, new teaching approaches, advisory approach, supportive teaching, combination of many and different approaches, friendly and warm approach, acceptance of diversity, inclusion of children in society, love and empathy, positive attitude, trust, safety, promoting equality, motivating all students, active participation, self-confidence, strengthening relationships within the group, social and personal development of students*).

It is noteworthy that most participants emphasized the need to apply multiple and different approaches in order to achieve optimal results.

In addition, participants' views on pedagogical approaches that promote academic and social inclusion of children with disabilities and/or special educational needs (*such as flexibility in how activities are presented, teachers who know how to teach the curriculum and why they use specific approaches, clear goals for students' academic and social development and lesson plans, developed collaboratively by teachers, parents, and students*) are consistent with preexisting theories, according to which, approaches distinguished of the above characteristics have a positive impact on students' participation in the classroom, academic achievement, self-esteem and trust in peer relationships (Sheehy et al, 2009; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Dyssegaard and Larsen, 2013; European Agency, 2016c).

What became clear from the respondents' opinions is that continuous training of teachers and especially of new entrants, regarding the application of new teaching methods as well as the selection of appropriate approaches, depending on the particular needs of each student, are the main quality assurance factors in special education and training.

It was also deemed necessary, according to their opinions, the excellent cooperation of all educational staff (teachers in general and special education, special education staff) to implement effective approaches to meet the needs of all students.

### **3.2 School leadership and management**

School's Leadership and Management, the second thematic axis, was also highlighted as one of the most important quality factors, regarding the promotion of social inclusion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, through the provision of equal and quality education.

In particular, effective administration is one of the primary factors of quality assurance in education. According to the views of almost all participants, principals who are governed by an inclusive culture can implement appropriate teaching methods to ensure equal participation of all students.

Indicatively they mentioned:

*".....the principal's leadership ability aims at creating a common vision for the school unit, promoting collaboration between teachers and improving teaching practice through the provision of logistical equipment and modern innovative practices for the provision of equal opportunities to all students....."*

Effective school management contributes to the assurance of quality learning process, curricula and teaching methods, by ensuring the equal participation and active involvement of all children, including students with SEN/ A in the educational process (ANED, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; European Agency, 2016c), to the support of the professional development of teachers and the promotion of social inclusion of students with special educational needs and/or disability, through the provision of equal and quality education (Janney & Snell, 2013; Villa & Thousand, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the majority of participants who worked in the inclusion departments had faced communication problems and insufficient cooperation with management, which hindered the smooth outcome of the inclusion process.

### **3.3 Social model of disability - Inclusive education**

According to the third thematic axis "Social model of disability - Inclusive education", participants referred to quality indicators, which facilitate inclusion and ensure a harmonious learning climate, through the cooperation of all the bodies involved in the planning of the inclusion process.

These elements derive both from the application of social model and the principles of inclusive education (*cooperation of those involved in the educational process - positive climate in the classroom - respect, acceptance - informing students and parents about differentiation and acceptance of diversity - teaching approaches and methods, which promote participation and cooperation of all children - assessment and feedback - counseling sessions with both the child and its parents - cooperation with counseling centers, teachers and parents - interdisciplinary approach and collaboration with the whole community - discussion of issues with the principal - observations and records*).

It is noteworthy that most of the participants frequently referred to the concept of participation of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities in the classroom,

the cooperation of all children with each other, as well as the academic and social achievements (culture of social skills, achievement of educational goals), which essentially, according to the researchers, are the most basic characteristics of short-term social inclusion (ANED, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Göransson and Nilholm, 2014; European Agency, 2016c), and can be achieved through inclusive education.

In particular, they referred to all three dimensions, in which the concept of participation consists, access (coexistence), collaboration (participatory learning) and diversity (recognition and acceptance) (Florian et al, 2011). They also emphasized the necessity of participation and cooperation of all involved bodies in the inclusion process (students, parents, colleagues, special and auxiliary staff, community, education officials), continuous communication and information, training and exchange of opinions.

### ***3.4 Education - Professional development of teachers***

The qualitative analysis of research data also highlighted the corresponding axis, related to the necessity of continuous education and training of teachers regarding new approaches and new teaching methods, as well as effective leadership.

In addition, most participants referred to several quality characteristics that teachers should possess in their educational role, such as professional integrity, leadership and communication skills, as well as the ability to collaborate with all those involved in the educational process, which are consistent with the quality principles of inclusive education.

It is also worth mentioning that, according to the opinions of the participants, many teachers experienced mixed and usually contradictory feelings while teaching in classes where students with special educational needs and/or disabilities attended, which were mainly due to lack of adequate training and skills, lack of support, the large number of students, lack of cooperation with the management, educational staff and parents, as well as the ineffective coverage of the needs of each student.

In particular, new teachers have usually facing great stress and insecurity during the first years of teaching in mainstream classrooms, due to a lack of knowledge and skills. For this reason, they considered it necessary to be supported by experts, advisors or mentors, for the acquisition of professional knowledge and the provision of psychological empowerment.

In addition, they argued that in order to meet the academic and social needs of children with SEN/A, continuous training and professional development, the development of a collaborative culture, the exchange of opinions between teachers as well as their networking with other schools are necessary.

The above findings are consistent with the theoretical background, since training of teachers regarding teaching of individualized goals, as well as their frequent support from specialists and experts (class observation by an expert, providing suggestions, demonstrating ways of intervening and commenting) are considered the most necessary conditions for the individualization of teaching and assurance of participation of children with disabilities (Wolery, 2007).

### ***3.5 Implementing the principles of medical model in education***

One last factor that emerged from the research is the emphasis placed on the medical model of disability. According to the opinions of participants, specialization and training of teachers regarding the preparation of individualized programs and teaching methods, taking into account the medical dimension of the disability, is deemed necessary.

In particular, too much emphasis was placed on the development of teaching methods, based on a biological-psychological perspective and taking into account the increasing

technological improvements in the field of diagnosis, principles deriving from the application of medical model of disability in education (Skrtic, 1991; Massoumeh, Leila, 2012; Palmer & Harley, 2012).

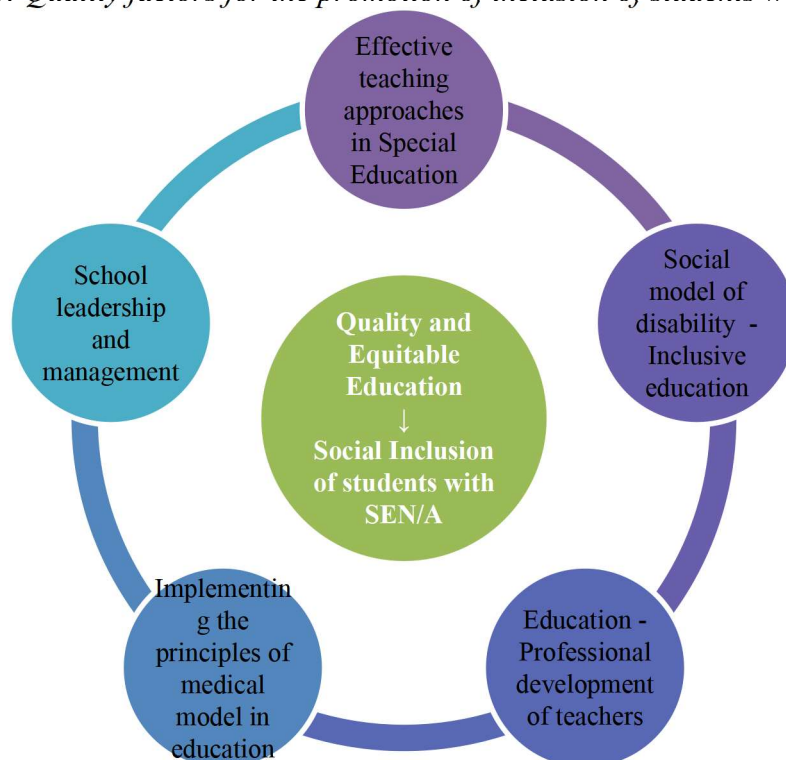
Participants referred to indicators of quality that facilitate inclusion and ensure a harmonious learning climate, through the cooperation of all bodies involved in the planning of inclusion process. Adequate logistical infrastructure, staff’s specialization, continuous training, personalized intervention programs, observations and records, definition of goals, continuous information and cooperation of teachers with each other, counseling centers, parents and other specialists are elements that derive from the application of the medical model in education.

This factor is also related to the need for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities to attend special schools, due to inefficient implementation of inclusion practices in general schools, absence of individualized teaching and special support and lack of expertise of teachers in managing inclusive classes.

**3.6 Quality factors for the promotion of the inclusion of students with SEN/A**

The figure below shows the main quality factors of the educational process, which can contribute to the promotion of the students’ with special educational needs and/or disabilities inclusion. It is worth noting that these factors are absolutely interdependent, since the implementation of one increases the results of the other and contributes to successful social inclusion of students.

*Figure 1: Quality factors for the promotion of inclusion of students with SEN/A*



#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Inclusive education has been found by many researchers to have an impact on social inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities both during their school life (more opportunities to make friends, better academic achievements) and after their graduation from school (more opportunities for independent living, maintaining friendships and social networks in adulthood, more opportunities to participate in leisure activities, more opportunities for employment, potential for financial independence) (ANED, 2011:18; European Agency, 2018).

However, regarding the Greek education system in current reality, there are still great inequalities for people with AEE/A, both in terms of access to education, as well as in the field of employment (E.S.A. withA., 2023). These inequalities were mainly intensified by pandemic, which contributed to their exclusion from access to education and to maximization of the digital divide.

It is deemed necessary to draw up a social policy, in accordance with the framework of the European Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030, which will ensure the equal participation of children with SEN/a in all sectors, among all stakeholders (staff, students and parents) and at all levels (school policy and practice, school culture) (UNESCO, 2005; Ebersold, 2007; Florian et al, 2011; European Agency, 2018 ).

According to this study, inclusive education can contribute to the promotion of social inclusion of children with SEN/A, when it incorporates elements and principles, which derive from both the application of medical model in education (such as excellent logistical infrastructure, specialization and continuous staff training, personalized intervention programs, observations and records, setting goals, continuous information and cooperation of teachers among themselves, with counseling centers, parents and other experts), as well as from the implementation of social model in education and the principles of inclusive education (such as cultivating a positive climate in the classroom, respect and acceptance, informing students and parents about differentiation and acceptance of diversity).

Particularly, in accordance with qualitative results, it could be inferred that education, continuous training of teachers, regarding new teaching approaches and methods, as well as effective leadership are the most basic quality factors in Special Education, which can contribute to the successful inclusion of students with SEN/A.

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