

# Abstract

The present research set out to assess in a comparative way the strategies-practices that early childhood general and special education teachers employ in order to advance the inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs) in general early childhood classrooms. The aim of the study is to investigate to what extent early childhood teachers promote access and participation for children with SENDs within the educational and social processes of the general classroom. The study further examines the way the concept of “quality” of inclusive experiences for children with SENDs is constructed within the Greek educational system. The association between quality, context and teacher’s characteristics is also tested.

Moreover, early childhood teachers’ views are enquired regarding: (1) their understanding of the notion of “inclusion”, (2) the educational advantages and social benefits of inclusion, (3) the factors that impede or advance the implementation of inclusion, (4) the engagement–participation of children with SENDs in typical classroom day routines and activities, (5) the emergent patterns of social interaction between children with and without disabilities and (6) their preferred strategies-practices for facilitating children’s involvement in the context of daily activities and routines and social interaction with peers.

The research is based on a concurrent mixed methods design since quantitative and qualitative data collection took place in parallel. For the purpose of quantitative data collection, a structured observation rating scale the “Inclusive Classroom Profile” was employed. Qualitative data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The sample of the research was constituted by 52 public early childhood classes for children 4-6 years old having at least one child with a diagnosed disability. The selected sample mirrored the full spectrum of “inclusive” provision in Greece, namely 22 (42.3%) of the participating classrooms operated pull-out programs, 17 (32.7%) had adopted an in-class support model, whereas in the remaining 13 (25.0%) cases no additional support was offered to children with disabilities. Also, 96 early childhood teachers participated in research 60.4% ( $n = 58$ ) of whom were early childhood general education teachers while the remaining 36.9% were ( $n = 38$ ) early childhood special education teachers.

Findings from the quantitative data analysis point to the fact that the quality offered in the sampled classes ranged between “inadequate” to “minimal” level. The analysis also reveals that quality was detected as a unidimensional construct that did not include the strategy: “planning and monitoring of children’s individual needs and goals”. In other words, early childhood teachers do not adapt the physical environment, the activities and their support according to the individual goals of children with disabilities. Within this context, children with SENDs are confronted with severe difficulties regarding both their engagement-participation in the class activities (display of low complexity behavior) and their interaction with peers (social rejection and/or adoption of secondary roles).

Quantitative data analysis assisted the process of investigation of the factors that engender the poor quality of “inclusive” services. The findings reveal that the level of quality was not dependent upon the following independent variables: the model of special education

provision, the group/class size, the number of children with disabilities, the training teachers had in special education or their teaching experience. On the contrary, qualitative analysis offered a complementary framework of analysis and data interpretation by revealing that teachers held conflicting and restrictive beliefs about inclusive education.

The results of the research are discussed in relation to their contribution to the development of culturally-sensitive instruments that will assess quality of early childhood inclusion and, by extension, the improvement of educational interventions. Finally, the contribution of the findings to the professional development of early childhood teachers and early childhood special education teachers is further discussed.

**Keywords:** early childhood inclusion, quality of early childhood inclusion, children with special educational needs and disabilities, inclusive strategies-practices, mixed methods research