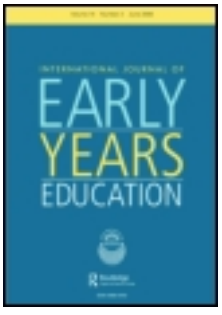
This article was downloaded by: [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa]
On: 01 May 2014, At: 08:01
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Early Years Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ciey20

Early childhood teachers' understanding of inclusive education and associated practices: reflections from Greece

Aristea Fyssa[a], Anastasia Vlachou[a] & Elias Avramidis[a]

[a] Department of Special Education, University of Thessaly, Argonafton & Filellinon, Volos, Greece

Published online: 29 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Aristea Fyssa, Anastasia Vlachou & Elias Avramidis (2014): Early childhood teachers' understanding of inclusive education and associated practices: reflections from Greece, International Journal of Early Years Education, DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2014.909309

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2014.909309

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

International Journal of Early Years Education, 2014
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2014.909309

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Early childhood teachers' understanding of inclusive education and associated practices: reflections from Greece

Aristea Fyssa*, Anastasia Vlachou and Elias Avramidis

Department of Special Education, University of Thessaly, Argonafton & Filellinon, Volos, Greece

(*Received 6 July 2013; accepted 16 August 2013*)

This paper focuses on Greek regular and special preschool teachers' understanding of inclusion; their views about the engagement of children with disabilities in typical day routines/activities; and their preferred strategies for facilitating children's engagement in classroom activities. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 77 teachers (45 regular and 32 special educators) drawn from 47 preschool mainstream settings in Greece. The analysis revealed that teachers hold conflicting and restrictive beliefs about inclusive education. Further, the teachers' accounts indicated that most of the children with disabilities were experiencing significant difficulties in their engagement during free-play as well as structured/semi-structured activities. Lastly, teachers identified a range of strategies that they deployed for promoting children's involvement in classroom activities. The paper concludes by highlighting the need to shift away from a narrow individualistic-deficit assumption of disability towards a socio-constructivist conceptualisation of 'diversity' and the establishment of genuinely inclusive school cultures.

Keywords: inclusive education; preschool teachers' perspectives; child engagement; inclusive pedagogies

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Introduction

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream preschool settings has recently gained momentum in Greece; fuelled in no small measure by international conventions championing educational and human right values (United Nations 2006) and offering guidelines for implementing inclusive education policies (UNESCO 2009). Similar directives have been endorsed by governments around the world and subsequently transformed into their legislative frameworks. Early childhood inclusion is based on the assumption that: it creates equal learning opportunities for children with disabilities; provides young children with opportunities to socialise with their peers in a range of natural environments; facilitates participation in community settings over time; and enriches children's development (Brown and Guralnick 2012; Guralnick et al. 2008).

Despite the proliferation of international and national policy initiatives, several questions are raised about the prevalence of preschool inclusion in many developed countries. Specifically, in countries where official data are available about the education of children with disabilities in preschool classrooms (for example, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2012; Odom, Buysse, and Soukakou 2011), the

*Corresponding author. Email: aristea.fyssa@gmail.com

© 2014 Taylor & Francis

emerging picture is a mixed one. Fully inclusive placements coexist with segregated special education provision in either the mainstream or the special sector. In this respect, the implementation of inclusive education is highly variable between and within countries.

Greece presents a very interesting example of a country where, despite supportive legislation, the movement of inclusive education is still facing considerable obstacles. More importantly, while the most recent legislation on Special Education (Law 3699/2008) places a heavy emphasis on inclusion, the implementation of this policy is far from straightforward. Indeed, inclusion is enacted in various ways representing different organisational arrangements, i.e., operation of 'integration classes' within mainstream schooling; provision of in-class support with the co-teaching model applied by special education teachers; and full placement in a mainstream classroom without additional support. The most common model of provision operating in schools is that of the 'integration classes' (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2012; Pedagogical Institute 2004) which, according to Vlachou (2006, 41), are ' much closer to the US pull-out programmes, or to what the British describe as part-time withdrawal in a learning support base'. In this respect, the term 'support room/class' could be seen as a more accurate description of such provision in Greece.

Underpinning the above forms of provision is a narrow deficit-oriented perspective that emphasises individual deficits and the need for their remediation, thus obscuring the institutional restructuring needed for genuine inclusion. Zoniou-Sideri and Vlachou (2006), for example, have strongly criticised Greek policy for applying a categorical system in relation to children with disabilities, thus strengthening a divisive ideology towards disability which perpetuates exclusion. In this context, even where organisational changes related to inclusion have taken place in mainstream schools, the adaptations needed in curriculum content and pedagogical practices have only minimally been fulfilled.

Recently, the government introduced a new curriculum for preschool education where differentiated instruction is advocated as the most promising strategy to facilitate equal participation for *all* students. Although the importance of this recent policy development cannot be underestimated, the impact on the educational practices in preschool settings and, by extension, the quality of provision offered remains unknown. This shortage of empirical evaluation studies in Greece can be partly attributed to the difficulty of conceptualising and measuring the 'quality' of provision.

Indeed, an ongoing debate exists among researchers about what constitutes quality and how it can be assessed (Sheridan 2009). Two aspects of quality which are related to 'structural' elements (e.g., child–adult ratio; teachers' qualifications and training) and 'process' elements (e.g., adult–child and peer interactions; planning, delivering and evaluation of activities) of a classroom have been primarily described (Mashburn et al. 2008; Peisner-Feinberg and Yazejian 2010; Sylva et al. 2006). While 'structural' quality elements appear to be straightforward and easily assessed, the conceptualisation and measurement of 'process' quality pose significant methodological challenges to researchers in the field. Efforts to overcome these challenges involve the development of observational rating scales (Soukakou 2012; Wolery et al. 2000) which cover several dimensions of process quality, including the level of children's engagement. Notwithstanding the importance of the other dimensions addressed, we contend here that 'engagement' is the first and foremost requirement of inclusive education. Given this, an emerging line of research in the field has focused on preschool teachers' beliefs and practices and, in particular, the role they can play in facilitating children's engagement in both free-play and structured activities. The next section presents a review of this small but illuminating body of the literature.

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Literature review

'Child engagement' is often operationalised as the degree to which children with disabilities interact appropriately with their environment (i.e., peers, adults and learning materials) reflecting opportunities for learning (Ridley, McWilliam, and Oates 2000). The existing empirical research on the social experiences of children with disabilities is contradictory. For example, while some positive outcomes have been reported favouring an inclusive classroom (Tsao et al. 2008), other research demonstrates that children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms tend to experience significant difficulties emanating from a decreased level of interactive engagement with peers (Guralnick et al. 2006). Consequently, compared to their typically developing peers, children with disabilities are at a relatively higher risk of social isolation (Odom et al. 2006). Indeed, they are often found to occupy vertical positions (i.e., assuming subordinate roles or being catered for or protected by others) within their peer culture (Janson 2007). As far as engagement in classroom activities is concerned, research has shown that disabled children's access to learning opportunities during child-initiated and adult-initiated activities is similar to their peers. However, the children's engagement is often differentiated by the level of complexity in the activities observed (Kemp et al. 2013; Odom et al. 2004).

Taken together, the aforementioned research findings suggest that the engagement of children with disabilities in the educational and social processes within regular preschool classrooms is not assured and it is, in fact, a complex issue. Thus, of critical importance is the role teachers can play in constructing and mediating the children's experiences in order to promote their engagement, learning and progress. In predominantly North American empirical studies, a range of strategies and intervention approaches have been identified as recommended practices to promote engagement within daily classroom routines/activities in ordinary classrooms (Buysse 2011). Examples are: adaptation of the environment, activities and materials; embedded learning opportunities to teach functionally and developmentally appropriate skills in naturalistic contexts; and instructional scaffolding strategies to provide more intense learning support (e.g., Campbell, Milbourne, and Wilcox 2008; Horn and Benerjee 2009).

Despite extensive empirical findings about strategies that facilitate preschool inclusion, a gap still exists between evidence-based practices and the actual practices practitioners employ (Odom 2009). In fact, it has been consistently found that while preschool teachers report positive beliefs about the philosophy of inclusion, at the same time they often adopt exclusionary practices thus posing substantial barriers to the children's inclusion (Clough and Nutbrown 2004; Nutbrown and Clough 2004). Researchers show that when teachers adopt a medical-deficit approach towards disability, children with disabilities are considered different and not the responsibility of the regular educators (Purdue 2009). Similarly Petriwskyj (2010) concluded that, the teachers' normative understanding of pedagogy, deficit-oriented position about diversity and persistence in additional specialised resources present significant barriers to the implementation of inclusive models of delivery; thus limiting further the disabled children's experiences. Overall, the findings reviewed here suggest that children's engagement in the activities available in a typical preschool environment is dependent on the teachers' understanding of inclusion and, by extension, their knowledge of how to construct the ecology of their classroom.

In light of this, the larger study upon which this article is based adopted an ecocultural theoretical perspective (Gallimore, Goldenberg, and Weisner 1993) and aimed to systematically examine the quality – both in terms of structure(s) and process(es) –of

inclusive provision offered in preschool settings. This project utilised a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques. Specifically, systematic observations were conducted in 52 preschool mainstream settings in order to assess the extent to which the teachers' adjustments of various elements of the classroom met the diverse needs of children with disabilities. These observations involved the application of the 'Inclusive Classroom Profile', a recently developed structured observation rating scale (Soukakou 2012) that provides numerical data. This evidence was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers working in the participating settings and with additional qualitative fieldwork. Given the breadth of data collected, it is not possible to present a full discussion of all the outcomes of the study in this article. Here we focus on evidence emanating from the interviews which relate to regular and special preschool teachers' perceptions of (1) the notion of inclusion; (2) the engagement of children with disabilities in a typical school day; and (3) their strategies for promoting engagement.

At this point it is worth clarifying the distinction between 'regular' and 'special' preschool teachers in the Greek context. Both groups of participants hold a four-year Bachelor degree in preschool education. Special teachers have also completed substantial training programmes conferring recognised qualifications in special education (i.e., a two-year training programme for in-service teachers, university-based courses leading to a master's degree, and 400-hour seminars delivered over a period of one year). With the exception of a few special preschool teachers who work in special schools, the majority assume the role of support teacher in mainstream education settings where they are either in charge of pull-out programmes or delivering in-class support to designated children with disabilities.

Method

Participants

The study sample consisted of 77 teachers (45 regular and 32 special educators) drawn from 47 mainstream preschool settings located in urban and suburban areas in the northern, western and central regions of Greece. The schools were randomly selected according to the following criteria: (1) public school, (2) serving children aged four to – six years old and (3) having at least one child on their register with identified disabilities based on the national school identification procedure (Law 3699/2008). According to the records of the selected schools, 77 children with officially diagnosed disabilities were educated in these settings, representing a range of disabilities. In particular, there were 31 children on the autistic spectrum, 25 children with developmental delays, 10 children with intellectual disabilities and 11 children with neurological impairments. Additionally, the selected sample represented the full spectrum of 'inclusive provision' in Greece: 16 of the selected schools operated 'integration classes', 18 had adopted an in-class support model, whereas in the remaining 13 settings no additional support was offered. Demographic information about the participating teachers is presented in Table 1.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Data were collected through interviews with 77 teachers from the selected schools. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured schedule which consisted of questions eliciting the respondents' understanding of inclusion; their perceptions of barriers and

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Table 1. Teachers' demographic characteristics.

Characteristics	Regular education teachers (RT)		Special education teachers (ST)	
	n	%	*n*	%
Gender				
Female	45	100	31	96.9
Male	–	–	1	3.1
Years of teaching experience				
<1	–	–	16	50
1–5	2	4.4	10	31.3
6–10	13	28.9	5	15.6
11–15	8	17.8	–	–
16–20	6	13.3	1	3.1
>20	16	35.6	–	–
Pre-service training				
B.Ed. in preschool education	45	100	31	96.9
B.Ed. in special education	–	–	1	3.1
Professional development on Special Education Needs				
None	36	80	–	–
Short-term courses[a]	9	20	3	9.4
Long-term courses[b]	–	–	29	90.6

[a]Short-term courses are forms of in-service training.
[b]Long-term courses are training programmes conferring recognised qualifications in special education.

factors affecting the successful implementation of inclusion; their perceived academic and social outcomes of inclusion; their views about the engagement of children with disabilities in typical day routines/activities; their strategies for facilitating children's involvement in classroom routines/activities; and their suggestions for professional development that promotes inclusive practices.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was carried out at a time and location convenient to the participants. Of the 77 participants (regular and special education teachers), 30 were interviewed individually either because they were the only teacher in a given early childhood classroom or their time-schedule did not coincide with their colleagues. For the remaining 47 interviewees, paired interviews were conducted consisting of a regular and a special teacher in their respective settings. In all paired interviews, participants were offered the opportunity of a follow-up one-to-one interview where sensitive issues could be mentioned without their colleague's presence.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 8, a computer-assisted programme designed to assist in qualitative data analysis. The data were coded and analysed according to the principles of the inductive data-driven approach (Boyatzis 1998). This process involved five stages. First, 10% of the transcribed interviews were read several times in order for the researcher to become familiar with the data. Respondents' thoughts were identified and distinguished under the questions that comprised the interview schedule. One member of the research team began the process of the first-level thematic coding line-by-line in order to develop descriptive codes. The codes were then clustered into inductive categories and subcategories to describe the emerging themes. To strengthen the credibility of the emergent categories another member of the research team independently read the responses of the teachers and automatically confirmed or else excluded inadequate categories from the initial list. The revised set of thematic codes was applied to the whole

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

sample, first via a 'within-case' and, subsequently, via a 'cross-case' analysis. Thus, we have mainly followed a qualitative thematic-analysis approach. The percentages given at the 'Findings' section are used in a complimentary manner to offer a more precise picture of the data and clarify vague notions such as 'a few teachers', 'a considerable number', 'a significant portion', etc.

Findings

The evidence discussed here emanated from those sections of the interview schedule which elicited the teachers' understanding of inclusion; their views about the engagement of children with disabilities in typical day routines/activities; and their preferred strategies for facilitating children's involvement in classroom routines/activities. Wherever children are mentioned as examples, pseudonyms have been used to protect their anonymity.

Teachers' understanding of 'inclusion'

The analysis of teachers' responses revealed that the vast majority ($N = 66$, 85.7%) hold beliefs that reflect an 'integrationist' rather than a truly inclusive perspective. Specifically, both regular and special teachers argued that the success of the process is largely dependent on the children's type of disability and, by extension, their functionality, their ability to adjust themselves in the preschool environment, the appropriateness of their behaviour and, generally, their ability to assimilate to the demands of the regular class:

> Inclusion in Nikos' case is possible because this child is able to function in class and keep up with what is going on, unlike other more difficult cases, who are left out because of their low potential. Inclusion is, therefore, only for those children who can participate in class activities and are able to communicate with other children. (Interview 68/ST)

Significantly, more than half of the regular teachers ($N = 23$, 51.4%), regarded inclusion as a normal process in which the child with a disability should adapt to a largely unchanged environment. This involved adapting to (1) the general demands of the school, (2) the programme and the activities of the classroom and (3) the rules in place for behaving in an acceptable manner. Within this line of thought, a considerable number of regular teachers ($N = 17$, 38%) held the belief that the main responsibility for meeting the needs of the disabled child lay with the special teacher:

> Inclusion means that the child (with disability) is working alongside their peers. Actually, in this classroom I have a lot of help because I am not responsible for meeting the child's needs, the special teacher supports the child in the class. She is responsible for this child. (Interview 2/RT)

Importantly, a significant portion of both regular and special teachers felt that the pull-out programmes delivered in integration classes were the most appropriate and effective form of inclusion. This evidence suggests that in the teachers' mindset, integration classes were deemed to be equivalent to inclusion. As one special needs teacher put it: 'For me, for implementing inclusive education it is essential that the child's needs are catered for in a separate classroom. I refer to that of the pull-out programme' (Interview 44).

At this point, it is worth noting that whilst 'integrationist' perspectives were widespread amongst the participating teachers, a considerable number of them ($N = 57$, 73.1%) also offered an understanding of inclusion based on participation in classroom

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

activities, and acceptance by the peer group and within broader contexts surrounding a child's life. Equally notable were the conceptualisations of inclusion held by 11 teachers (14.3%; 7 special and 4 regular), whereby the process was described as a multi-dimensional one depending on both child-related characteristics and, more importantly, on school-related factors (i.e., collaboration among teachers, curriculum modification and materials adaptation).

The engagement of children with disabilities in typical school day routines/activities

According to the teachers' responses, a typical school day comprised of both free-play child-initiated activities and semi-structured or structured teacher-directed activities. Structured activities consisted of whole-class tasks, small-group work and/or individual assignments. It is worth noting here that all these activities were designed and carried out by the regular teachers without any input from their special education colleagues wherever these existed.

In terms of children's engagement, some important observations can be made. When referring to free-play conditions, teachers focused on the issue of children's interactions with peers. Specifically, they reported that most of the children with disabilities engaged mainly in solitary play or interacted with other pupils with disabilities, wherever the latter were present. Only few teachers (N = 14, 18.2%) reported that children with disabilities used to engage in some form of cooperative play with their peers while seven respondents (9.1%) mentioned that no free time was set aside in the daily schedule for children with disabilities to play, posing as such a further barrier to the children's interactive engagement with peers:

> Tassos (child on the AS) comes into school about an hour late compared to the other children … so he is not present for free-play because he can't wake up earlier in the morning. … and because he can't play with the other children or find a way to occupy himself. Therefore, there's no point for the child to be coming in so early and just sitting here without participating. (Interview 38/RT)

In cases where children with disabilities were present during free-play activities, teachers focused also on the ways children interacted with the learning materials provided. Specifically, 74.3% (N = 52) of the participating teachers mentioned that children with disabilities engaged to some extent with materials such as puzzles, markers, building blocks or modelling clays. However, half of these participants (N = 26, 50%) described the children's engagement with the learning materials as of low level with respect to the time spent. The teachers' accounts indicated that although disabled children could be physically or verbally involved with learning materials, their behaviours were not goal-directed (e.g., child displays repetitive behaviours or looks at objects or simply holds materials). Only 14 teachers indicated that children with disabilities engaged with the learning materials and interacted meaningfully with their peers:

> Most of the time, Zissis (child with DD), makes beautiful creative projects, in a very careful and imaginative way. Moreover, he solves problems with the other kids he plays with in order to achieve a good result. (Interview 47/RT)

Strikingly, a significant minority of teachers (N = 18, 25.7%) mentioned that some children with disabilities either did not interact with the materials of the classroom thus acquiring a passive position (e.g., child wanders around aimlessly or remains unoccupied)

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

or displayed behaviours that precluded them from appropriate engagement (e.g., child breaks play-related rules or refuses to get involved).

When referring to structured or semi-structured conditions, the majority of the teachers ($N = 64$, 83.1%) mentioned that children with disabilities often do not succeed in complying with the demands of the activities despite their efforts. Furthermore, 70.3% ($N = 45$) of the teachers mentioned that these pupils were observed to exhibit low attention, to remain minimally involved by just looking at objects/others or to follow passively the rules of the activity and display behaviours unrelated to the goals of the tasks set. In this respect, these children's engagement could be seen as of low complexity:

> Kostas' (child on the AS) participation depends on the activity set. For example, in activities that demand about half an hour of work sitting around a table, he can remain focused for only 10 to 15 minutes. … Or during a psycho-motor activity, when the teacher may give directions to the children ('Do the stork or do the penguin or do something else'), instead of following the directions, he just runs around aimlessly. (Interview 78/ST)

Around one-third of the participating teachers, mentioned that children with disabilities either did not interact with others/materials or displayed behaviours that significantly disrupted the learning process. Only a minority of participants ($N = 13$, 16.9%) reported that these children's engagement in teacher-directed activities was most of the time active and intentional:

> When a structured activity takes place (for example, 'circle- time'), Petros (child on the AS) sits very nicely, listens, participates. Also, whenever he is given the chance to speak, he expresses his opinion on what we are talking about. Moreover, he is careful with the rules, that is, if you tell him we'll do this or that he will do it very well and very carefully and just as we tell him. (Interview 70/ST)

Further analysis of the data showed that the vast majority of teachers ($N = 66$, 85.7%) attributed the disabled children's level of engagement to their individual characteristics. Children's ability, behavioural characteristics, personal interests and temperament were viewed as the main factors that influenced the children's engagement in the classroom's scheduled activities. In fact, half of these teachers ($N = 33$, 50%) did not include children with disabilities in academically demanding activities on the basis of their perceived inability to gain from these activities. Only 11 participants (14.3%) stated that the disabled children's engagement in teacher-directed activities was influenced by school-related parameters. As one special teacher puts it:

> For inclusion to be implemented certain adaptations are required to ensure their participation such as offering them a joint activity in the regular classroom even for 10 minutes … I have proposed to my (regular) colleague to design specific motor activities so that children with disabilities can be involved but she disagreed. (Interview 34)

Teachers' strategies for promoting the disabled children's engagement

The analysis of the respondents' accounts of the strategies they deployed to promote the disabled children's engagement provided rather mixed results. On the one hand, 62% ($N = 48$) of the participating teachers reported a number of specific strategies (i.e., instructional support and environmental arrangements) to enable children to engage with their peers in classroom's tasks. Interestingly, these modifications were used to a similar

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Table 2. Frequency of strategies commonly used by teachers to facilitate child engagement.

Strategies	*n*	%
Differentiation of instructional support		
Verbally prompting, asking questions and reminding or explaining instructions	25/48	52.1
Differentiating the pace, time and level of delivery instruction	22/48	45.8
Providing systematic and structured guidance	19/48	39.6
Environmental arrangements		
Selecting and/or adjusting activities	11/48	22.9
Setting up group activities and assigning roles to children	10/48	20.8
Selecting and/or adjusting learning materials	5/48	10.4

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

degree by both regular and special education teachers. On the other hand, a smaller but considerable number of participants (N = 29, 38%) stated that they organised the daily routines/activities according to the needs of the typical/average student, which were in turn presented undifferentiated (i.e., same goals and materials) to all children in their class.

With regard to the modifications reported, Table 2 depicts the strategies that teachers used more frequently in relation to their instructional support towards children with disabilities, namely: verbally prompting, asking questions and reminding or explaining instructions whilst using easily understood vocabulary; differentiating the pace, time and level of delivery instruction; and providing systematic and structured direction.

Concerning the environmental arrangements made, the following ones were frequently reported to match pupils' abilities and interests: providing selective and/or adaptive materials (e.g., attractive learning materials, laminated pictures, using signals); selecting appropriate activities for children to get involved in (e.g., free-play, art projects) and adjusting the class activities (e.g., adopting playful ways of learning, arranging frequently drama play activities, rearranging timetable); and setting up group activities and assigning roles to children:

> I use certain strategies, such as various symbols. For example, one symbol I use is the tambourine, or a particular song. When they hear that song it means it's time to put away our things and get ready to move on. That's very important because it makes it easier to go into the next activity. (Interview 47/RT)

> Whenever a child is on its own, I try to arrange the space around him/her in order to invite other children in and form a group. This is important because it enables that child to carry out an activity, or at least to be with other children during free-play and work alongside them. (Interview 23/ST)

The abovementioned adaptations reflect the teachers' efforts to ensure that children with disabilities are engaged with the same type of activity as their peers. However, in their attempt to differentiate the activity, they often over-simplified the task or the level of guidance given was much higher than it ought to be. Thus, the ways the reported adaptations were implemented were not conducive to stimulating children towards exceeding their individual goals and enabling them to participate actively in the context of their peer interactions. Instead, these practices can be seen as indicative of the low expectations teachers had from the children with disabilities with regard to fulfilling the same tasks as their peers:

> […] I usually ask simple questions… For example, I asked Jim (child with ID) in relation to the ongoing activity 'What did you like about the story?' and he responded 'I liked the poppy'. and then I asked him back 'What was the colour of the poppy?' I didn't have the same expectations from Jim to understand the emotions of the poppies in that fairy tale in the same way that I was expecting it from the typical children. I knew that he wasn't able to understand the emotions. (Interview 64/RT)

Such ineffective practices were widespread, but, by no means, common across all teachers reporting adaptations. For example, two teachers (one regular and one special) who were working in the same class deliberately encouraged a student with autism to take an active role in his interaction with peers. Indicative is the quotation that follows:

> Because Pavlos (child on the AS) was becoming isolated during free-play, and he was often preoccupied with his favourite object – the map and the flags … so I taught him to teach the rest of the children about maps, which he knew well, so that they could also learn about them. (Interview 3/ST)

When considering the group of teachers ($N = 29$, 38%) who organised their daily routines and activities according to the needs of the typical/average student some interesting observations can be made. First, for some teachers, their tendency to present undifferentiated activities to all children in their class reflects their belief that children with disabilities ought to participate in the same activities as their peers, and perform a task or display behaviours consistent with the demands of school. For others, such practices were enacted on the belief that the disabled children's severity of difficulties would prevent them from meeting the expectations of the regular setting.

> Well, we don't do anything different for this particular child. We don't single him out. Our behaviour is the same towards all the children including Dimitris (child with ID). We don't change anything. (Interview 17/RT)

> Nothing … I don't do anything different with them compared to the other children. I don't know whether Anna (child with DD) or Makis (child on the AS) or Yiannis (child with ID) are able to understand what we do in class. They can't express themselves, or show any signs of understanding. So I don't change anything. (Interview 36/RT)

Further analysis of the data revealed another striking pattern, whereby a considerable number of regular teachers ($N = 29$, 64%) relied heavily on the services provided by special educators since the latter were seen as possessing the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise to plan arrangements or interventions for children with disabilities.

> Well, with this particular child, no … I don't do anything extra. After all, I'm not a special teacher. I don't believe that this is my responsibility; it is the responsibility of the special teacher who is here to support the child and go the extra mile to help her or supervise her activities more closely. (Interview 67/RT)

Discussion

The results of this investigation should be interpreted cautiously in light of some important study limitations. Specifically, respondents were drawn from certain provincial regions of Greece, which cannot be considered as representative of the whole Greek country. Consequently, the findings might not apply in some geographical areas with

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

particular characteristics such as inner-city capital areas or distant islands. Moreover, although the number of interviews conducted ($N = 77$) is sufficient for a qualitative study, it would have been interesting to link this qualitative evidence with numerical data obtained from a nation-wide survey. Finally, interviews with parents and children would provide additional rich information, rendering the study more rigorous. Notwithstanding these limitations, the results reported here advance the existing knowledge base and offer important practical implications for policy-makers and professionals in the field.

Overall, Greek preschool teachers in this study held conflicting and restrictive beliefs about inclusive education. Specifically, although inclusion was perceived as a means of promoting the disabled children's acceptance and participation within class activities, at the same time, most teachers adopted an 'integrationist' perspective. In fact, it was assumed that the children's type of disability and, by extension, their functionality and their ability to assimilate to the demands of a largely unchanged classroom environment were the main determinants of their inclusion. The assimilationist standpoint detected in this study confirms previous research depicting Greek teachers as sceptical professionals and far from adhering to a blank commitment to inclusive education (Avramidis and Kalyva 2007; Batsiou et al. 2008). Similar reservations have been reported in international studies examining teachers' beliefs about inclusive education (Nutbrown and Clough 2004; Odom et al. 2004; Purdue 2009).

Of concern was the finding that Greek teachers who hold to a deficit-oriented approach view children with disabilities as 'different' and the responsibility of the special teacher. Consequently, 'integration classes' were deemed as the most appropriate type of provision for including children with disabilities in the mainstream. The operation of these integration classes resembles the workings of traditional special units (i.e., specialist self-contained classes) whereby segregation occurs within an ostensibly inclusive setting. In this respect, the evidence reported here confirms Liasidou's (2007) argument that special education paradigms still prevail in the mindset of both regular and special educators.

Given the way teachers approach inclusion, it was not surprising to find in our study that the engagement of children with disabilities in typical school day activities was rather limited. Specifically, children's engagement in structured activities was of low complexity while in free-play conditions children spent more time alone (solitary play) and their involvement with the learning materials (mastery play) was minimal. This finding is not surprising as many studies examining the experiences of disabled children in regular preschool settings have consistently reported poor levels of engagement (Guralnick et al. 2006; Kontos, Moore, and Giorgetti 1998; Luttropp and Granlund 2010), the children's engagement in structured activities was of similar low complexity. The accounts presented here suggest that children with disabilities often exhibited low attention, adopted passive roles and displayed behaviours unrelated to the goals of the tasks set. Such divergent behaviours were also reported in another Greek study by Barbas et al. (2006) in which children with disabilities in regular preschools engaged minimally with the activities set. Nevertheless, the absence of any other rigorous studies in Greece on this issue means that such conclusions should be treated with caution.

Taken collectively, the evidence reported here illustrates the limited opportunities afforded to disabled children for active engagement. This negative finding is indicative of the ineffective strategies employed by the participating teachers. Specifically, despite the teachers' claims of differentiated instruction and the physical/social environment modification, the outcomes reported were far from satisfactory. At a deeper level of analysis, it was revealed that teachers tended to oversimplify specific aspects of the

activities or to provide higher guidance to children than might be needed. These practices could be attributed to the low expectations teachers had of children with disabilities. Moreover, it was found that a considerable number of regular teachers reported that they organised the daily school routines/activities according to the needs of the typical/average student (i.e., without making any adaptations). From this perspective, neither of these responses satisfies the striving for equal and full participation and meaningful learning of children with disabilities in the context of classroom's daily activities and interactions with their peers (Odom and Wolery 2003).

Paradoxically, this study found very little collaboration between the regular teachers and their special colleagues. Special teachers had no input in constructing the learning activities of the mainstream class and tended to work solely with the individual child or to withdraw the child in the integration class for individualised instruction. Such practice reflects what Vlachou (2004), amongst others, has described as a discourse of 'expertism'; that is, modified practices were perceived as the sole responsibility of the special educator implemented predominantly outside the mainstream class. This ideology was expressed by both regular and special teachers.

Conclusion

The study reported here has sought to fill a gap in the literature since it is the first of its kind conducted in Greece. In so doing, this study has succeeded in highlighting the importance of preschool teachers creating inclusive learning environments where children with disabilities can be successfully accommodated. We contend here, that this can only be achieved through offering in-service professional development, a significant shift in policy towards the establishment of more collaborative school cultures, and the formulation of 'productive' school pedagogies in which issues of social justice and equity are foregrounded.

Given the ineffective strategies employed by the participating teachers and their negative implications discussed earlier, it is vital that Greek teachers are offered opportunities to continue their professional development. It could be suggested that Greek teachers may not be negative or sceptical towards inclusion; rather, they may not see solutions to problems that they feel are outside their competence or control. Consequently, if teachers are guided and supported through careful and well-planned training courses, then it can be anticipated that their beliefs can change and, as a result of that, remarkable improvements in their practices can be achieved. This is especially important in the Greek context as training opportunities are limited and where these are available they tend to be short term and ineffective.

Notwithstanding the importance of professional development courses, progress cannot be achieved without fundamental changes in the ways schools operate. These changes can be engineered through a significant shift in policy whereby collaboration between professionals is promoted. In this respect, the 'discourse of expertism' dominating Greek schools will be surmounted if regular and special educators are forced to work together. Specifically, both professionals need to accept responsibility for modifying the curriculum in ways that are conducive to meeting the needs of all learners including those with disabilities.

Finally, there is a pressing need for schools to develop an inclusive pedagogical approach based on the fundamental issues of quality, social justice and equality for all children – irrespective of their individual characteristics. This inclusive pedagogical orientation must be embedded in educational policy documents and inform the content of

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

both initial teacher education programmes and in-service courses. In this way, the processes of pathologising 'difference' (and, ultimately, excluding individuals) currently operating in schools can be challenged, while reconstructed educational thinking and practice are instigated.

In conclusion, the insights gained from this study are by no means confined to Greece. Instead, we believe that the recommendations made here may have application elsewhere. At a time when inclusion is high on the international policy agenda, more studies of this nature are needed to enhance our understanding of the complexities of inclusion and assist policy-makers and practitioners in their efforts to realise the 'inclusion project'.

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Funding

This research was supported and co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program 'Education and Lifelong Learning' of the National Strategic Framework (NSRF) – Research Funding Program: Heracleitus II, Investigating in knowledge through the European Social Fund [grant number MIS 339852].

References

Avramidis, E., and E. Kalyva. 2007. "The Influence of Teaching Experience and Professional Development on Greek Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusion." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 22 (4): 367–389. doi:10.1080/08856250701649989.

Barbas, G., M. Birbili, P. Stagiopoulos, and S. Tzivinikou. 2006. "A Pilot Study of Factors Affecting the Process of Integration in Greek Nursery Schools." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 21 (2): 217–226. doi:10.1080/08856250600600950.

Batsiou, S., E. Bebetsos, P. Panteli, and P. Antoniou. 2008. "Attitudes and Intention of Greek and Cypriot Primary Education Teachers towards Teaching Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 12 (2): 201–219. doi:10.1080/13603110600855739.

Boyatzis, R. E. 1998. *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Brown, S. E., and M. J. Guralnick. 2012. "International Human Rights to Early Intervention for Infants and Young Children with Disabilities: Tools for Global Advocacy." *Infants & Young Children* 25 (4): 270–285. doi:10.1097/IYC.0b013e318268fa49.

Buysse, V. 2011. "Access, Participation, and Supports: The Defining Features of High-quality Inclusion." *Zero to Three* 31 (4): 24–31.

Campbell, P. H., S. Milbourne, and M. J. Wilcox. 2008. "Adaptation Interventions to Promote Participation in Natural Settings." *Infants & Young Children* 21 (2): 94–106. doi:10.1097/01.IYC.0000314481.16464.75.

Clough, P., and C. Nutbrown. 2004. "Special Educational Needs and Inclusion: Multiple Perspectives of Preschool Educators in the UK." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 2 (2): 191–211. doi:10.1177/1476718X04043015.

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. 2012. *Special Needs Education Country Data 2012*. http://www.europeanagency.org/publications/ereports/sne-country-data-2012/SNE-Country-Data2012.pdf.

Gallimore, R., C. N. Goldenberg, and T. S. Weisner. 1993. "The Social Construction and Subjective Reality of Activity Settings: Implications for Community Psychology." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 21 (4): 537–560. doi:10.1007/BF00942159.

Guralnick, M. J., R. T. Connor, B. Neville, and M. A. Hammond. 2006. "Promoting the Peer-related Social Development of Young Children with Mild Developmental Delays: Effectiveness of a Comprehensive Intervention." *American Journal on Mental Retardation* 111 (5): 336–356. doi:10.1352/0895-8017(2006)111[336:PTPSDO]2.0.CO;2.

Guralnick, M. J., B. Neville, M. A. Hammond, and R. T. Connor. 2008. "Continuity and Change from Full-inclusion Early Childhood Programs through Early Elementary Period." *Journal of Early Intervention* 30 (3): 237–250. doi:10.1177/1053815108317962.

Horn, E., and R. Benerjee. 2009. "Understanding Curriculum Modifications and Embedded Learning Opportunities in the Context of Supporting All Children's Success." *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* 40 (4): 406–415. doi:10.1044/0161-1461(2009/08-0026).

Janson, U. 2007. "Preschool Cultures and the Inclusion of Children with Disabilities." *Japanese Journal of Special Education* 44 (6): 405–422.

Kemp, C., Y. Kishida, M. Carter, and N. Sweller. 2013. "The Effect of Activity Type on the Engagement and Interaction of Young Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Childcare Settings." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 28 (1): 134–143. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2012.03.003.

Kontos, S., D. Moore, and K. Giorgetti. 1998. "The Ecology of Inclusion." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 18 (1): 38–48. doi:10.1177/027112149801800107.

Law 3699/2008. *Ειδική αγωγή και εκπαίδευση ατόμων με αναπηρία ή με ειδικέςεκπαιδευτικές ανάγκες,* ΦΕΚ 199/02-10-2008 [The Special Education and Education of Persons with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs, FEK 199/02–10–2008]. Athens: Ethniko Typographeio.

Liasidou, A. 2007. "Inclusive Education Policies and the Feasibility of Educational Change: The Case of Cyprus." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 17 (4): 329–347. doi:10.1080/09620210701666972.

Luttropp, A., and M. Granlund. 2010. "Interaction – It Depends – a Comparative Study of Interaction in Preschools between Children with Intellectual Disability and Children with Typical Development." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 12 (3): 151–164. doi:10.1080/15017410903175677.

Mashburn, A. J., R. C. Pianta, B. K. Hamre, J. T. Downer, O. A. Barbarin, D. Bryant, M. Burchinal, D. M. Early, and C. Howes. 2008. "Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills." *Child Development* 79 (3): 732–749. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01154.x.

Nutbrown, C., and P. Clough. 2004. "Inclusion and Exclusion in the Early Years: Conversations with European Educators." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 19 (3): 301–315. doi:10.1080/0885625042000262479.

Odom, S. L. 2009. "The Tie that Binds: Evidence-based Practice, Implementation, Science, and Outcomes for Children." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 29 (1): 53–61. doi:10.1177/0271121408329171.

Odom, S. L., V. Buysse, and E. Soukakou. 2011. "Inclusion for Young Children with Disabilities: A Quarter of Research Perspectives." *Journal of Early Intervention* 33 (4): 344–356. doi:10.1177/1053815111430094.

Odom, S. L., J. Virtzum, R. Wolery, J. Lieber, S. Sandall, M. J. Hanson, P. Beckman, I. Schwartz, and E. Horn. 2004. "Preschool Inclusion in the United States: A Review of Research from an Ecological Systems Perspective." *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 4 (1): 17–49. doi:10.1111/J.1471-3802.2004.00016.x.

Odom, S. L., and M. Wolery. 2003. "A Unified Theory of Practice in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education: Evidence-based Practices." *The Journal of Special Education* 37 (3): 164–173. doi:10.1177/00224669030370030601.

Odom, S. L., C. Zercher, S. Li, J. M. Marquart, S. Sandall, and W. H. Brown. 2006. "Social Acceptance and Rejection of Preschool Children with Disabilities: A Mixed-method Analysis." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 98 (4): 807–823. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.98.4.807.

Pedagogical Institute. 2004. *Χαρτογράφηση Ειδικής Αγωγής: Στατιστικά στοιχεία για τους μαθητές, τους εκπαιδευτικούς, και τις σχολικές μονάδες στην Πρωτοβάθμια και Δευτεροβάθμια Εκπαίδευση* [Mapping of Special Education: Statistics about Pupils, Teachers and School Units in Primary and Secondary Education]. Athens: Pedagogical Institute.

Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., and N. Yazejian. 2010. "Research on Program Quality: The Evidence Base." In *The Quest for Quality: Promising Innovations for Early Childhood Programs*, edited by Patricia W. Wesley and Virginia Buysse, 21–45. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Petriwskyj, A. 2010. "Diversity and Inclusion in the Early Years." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14 (2): 195–212. doi:10.1080/13603110802504515.

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014

Purdue, K. 2009. "Barriers to and Facilitators of Inclusion for Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Education." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 10 (2): 133–143. doi:10.2304/ciec.2009.10.2.133.

Ridley, S. M., R. A. McWilliam, and C. S. Oates. 2000. "Observed Engagement as an Indicator of Child Care Program Quality." *Early Education & Development* 11 (2): 133–146. doi:10.1207/s15566935eed1102_1.

Sheridan, S. 2009. "Discerning Pedagogical Quality in Preschool." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 53 (3): 245–261. doi:10.1080/00313830902917295.

Soukakou, E. 2012. "Measuring Quality in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms: Development and Validation of the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP)." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 27 (3): 478–488. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.12.003.

Sylva, K., I. Siraj-Blatchford, B. Taggart, P. Sammons, E. Melhuish, K. Elliot, and V. Totsika. 2006. "Capturing Quality in Early Childhood through Environment Rating Scales." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21 (1): 76–92. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2006.01.003.

Tsao, L., S. L. Odom, V. Buysse, M. Skinner, T. West, and J. Virtzum-Komanecki. 2008. "Social Participation of Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Preschool Programs: Program Typology and Ecological Features." *Exceptionality* 16 (3): 125–140. doi:10.1080/09362830802198203.

UNESCO. 2009. *policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education*. Paris: UNESCO. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001778/177849e.pdf.

United Nations. 2006. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. New York, NY: United Nations. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/convtexte.htm#convtext.

Vlachou, A. 2004. "Education and Inclusive Policy-making: Implications for Research and Practice." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 8 (1): 3–21. doi:10.1080/1360311032000139449.

Vlachou, A. 2006. "Role of Special/Support Teachers in Greek Primary Schools: A Counter-productive Effect of 'Inclusion' Practices." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10 (1): 39–58. doi:10.1080/13603110500221586.

Wolery, M., T. Pauca, M. S. Brashers, and S. Grant. 2000. *Quality of Inclusive Experiences Measure*. Chapel Hill, NC: Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Zoniou-Sideri, A., and A. Vlachou. 2006. "Greek Teachers' Belief Systems about Disability and Inclusive Education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10 (4–5): 379–394. doi:10.1080/13603110500430690.

Downloaded by [University of Thessaly], [Aristea Fyssa] at 08:01 01 May 2014