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Parental Attitudes Regarding Inclusion of
Children with Disabilities in Greek Education Settings.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine parents' attitudes toward inclusion of their children with disabilities in general education and to associate their perspectives with parent variables (e.g. education) and child variables (e.g. age, severity of disability). The sample consisted of parents (51 mothers, 68 fathers) of children with disabilities, residing in Thessaly region. Each parent completed the Attitude Toward Inclusion/ Mainstreaming" scale (Leyser and Kirk, 2004), composed of 18 items selected and adapted for parent respondents that assess scores for the factors of benefits, satisfaction, teacher ability and inclusion support, and child rights. The results of the study revealed children's age and gender as the factors that mainly influence parents' views regarding inclusion. In the lights of the findings useful conclusions were drawn and the concept of inclusion in Greek education settings was further analysed.

Keywords: Parents, Attitudes, Inclusion, Children with Disabilities

Introduction

The last decades the idea of inclusion, that is, educating students with disabilities in programs and activities for typically developing children in a variety of situations (Odom and Diamond, 1998; Rizzo, Davis and Toussaint, 1994), has become the most important topic in the field of special education. The inclusion movement has been reinforced by many who believe that separate education is not an equal education, leading to the development of inclusive practices as a guiding educational policy in many countries.

The setting in which an inclusion program is implemented significantly influences the program provided for a child (Winnick, 2000). Inclusion programs typically assume the ability of the educator to use developmentally appropriate practices (Auxter, Pyfer and Huettig, 2001) and the availability of support services accompanying students with disabilities into the typical education classes (Sherrill, 1998; Houston-Wilson, Dunn, Van der Mars and MacCubbin, 1997; Sideridis and Chandler, 1997; Block and Zeman, 1996; Block, 1994).

However, barriers to inclusion of students with disabilities in typical education are often mentioned. Some of these are the inadequate training and attitudes of general education teachers, the huge class size and the lack of equipment and support personnel (Auxter *et al.*, 2001), the lack of specialised training and support for child care providers to provide inclusive child care (Grove and Fisher, 1999; Warfield and Hauser-Cram, 1996; Fewell, 1993) as well as concerns about the attitudes of care providers and general education teachers regarding serving children with special needs in their programs (Rafferty and Griffin, 2005; Bennett, DeLuca, and Bruns, 1997; Crowley, 1990).

Considerable debate also continues among educators in regard to the implementation of full inclusion in practice (Lindsay, 2003; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, Smith, & Leal, 2002; Kavale and Forness, 2000) as compared with the equally strong concept of *least restrictive environment*, a continuum of alternative education environments ranging from segregated formats to fully integrated placements without modifications that reflect the nature and severity of the disability and the ability of the individual to adapt and perform (Etcheidt, 2006; Stein and Paciorek, 1994).

Research indicates that inclusion does not promote positive attitudes, unless specific interaction experiences are planned and the environment is carefully structured (Jones, 1984). Many teachers have negative attitudes toward students with disabilities because they do not know how to teach them (Clark, French and Henderson, 1986). Furthermore, parents' concerns of children with disabilities regarding social integration and academic progress of their child in inclusive settings (Leyser and Kirk, 2004;

Palmer, Fuller, Arora, and Nelson, 2001; Seery, Davis, and Johnson, 2000; Fox and Ysseldyke, 1997) create issues as well.

Parents have a major role in the challenging and dynamic inclusion process that starts with the parents' decision to place their child in a mainstream setting. Consequently, over the last two decades a number of studies examined parent views and concerns about inclusion, leading to contradictory results. Several of these studies concerning parents of children with mild or moderate disabilities (Leyser and Kirk, 2004; Seery, Davis, and Johnson, 2000; Bennett, DeLuca, and Bruns, 1997; Simpson and Myles, 1989) and parents of children with severe disabilities (Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy and Widaman, 1998; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995; Hanline and Halvorsen, 1989) were supportive of inclusion practices and satisfied with the benefits provided for their child. However, results from other studies (Palmer, Fuller, Arora, and Nelson, 2001; Fox and Ysseldyke, 1997; Green and Shinn, 1994) report less support.

According to Hanline and Halvorsen (1989), common parents' concerns include safety, attitudes of other students, staff and program quality, transportation, district commitment, and potential for failure related to the severity of the child's disability. Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger, and Alkin (1999) identified diagnosis, age, and current placement as factors that have an impact on parent perceptions toward inclusion, whether Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) recognised that parents' education level, marital status, and number of children were associated with their inclusion beliefs.

At present, the idea of inclusive education is gaining ground in many parts of the world, in an attempt to promote children's welfare that is paramount to parents (Jenkinson,1998). As the implementation of inclusive practices continues, so does the need to evaluate their effectiveness. Implementation of this change to educational systems, however, differs between nations and within nations as well (Kugelmass, 2006). In the United States, Canada, England and other countries, there are laws that promote inclusive programs in general education. In Greece, the law 2817/200 established the idea of "co-education" stating that "education for children with disabilities should provided to typical primary and secondary schools which are responsible for the organisation, recruitment of teaching staff and provision of support services so as to ensure the necessary teaching and pedagogical support of these children" (Law 2817/200, No.1, paragraph 1). However, necessary issues including parents' attitudes need to be addressed in order to bridge the gap between the theory of inclusion and its application in Greece (Papadopoulou, Kokaridas, Papanikolaou & Patsiaouras, 2004). Today, no inclusive practices are actually implemented in Greece and often parents are commenting on a hypothetical

situation of what their children could possibly experience in mainstream schools, often not certain to decide regarding teacher ability and possible loss of support services in mainstream education.

Parents undoubtedly play a critical role in the lives of their children therefore examination of parents' views is an important aspect of the evaluation of the inclusion movement. Useful conclusions could also be drawn with the comparison of parents' attitudes toward inclusion from different studies.

The purpose of this study was to examine parents' attitudes toward inclusion of their children with disabilities in Greek general education settings and to associate their perspectives with parent variables (e.g. education) and child variables (e.g. age, severity of disability).

Method

The sample consisted of 119 parents (68 mothers, 51 fathers) of children with disabilities (56 with mental retardation without Down Syndrome (DS), 21 with mental retardation and DS, 8 with autism and 27 with cerebral palsy) residing in Thessaly region. Each parent completed the Attitude Toward Inclusion/ Mainstreaming Scale (Leyser and Kirk, 2004), composed of 18 items selected and adapted for parent respondents that assess scores for the following factors: a) benefits of inclusion for students with and without disabilities as perceived by parents, b) parent satisfaction with their child's progress and special education services compared to inclusion, c) parent perceptions of teacher ability and inclusion support by parents of students without disabilities and d) the child rights factor related to the philosophical and legal justification of inclusion (Table 1).

The participants responded on a 5-point Likert-type scale, anchored by strongly agree (1 point) and strongly disagree (5 points) for each item. Eight items were statements in favour of inclusion and 10 items that express negative attitudes were reverse-coded during the analyses so that low ratings can be interpreted as favourable to inclusion.

The researchers gave verbal instructions prior to the completion of the questionnaire and they were present during the whole process to provide any additional information required by the parents. A brief introduction indicating the purpose of the study and asking parents to provide background information (i.e., the type and severity level of the child's disability, age of child, education level of parents) was also included.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis included the use of the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS 10.0). Cronbach a reliability analysis was used in order to determine internal consistency of the questionnaire. The Pearson correlation coefficient provided estimates of associations among the subscales of the questionnaire. A t-test for independent samples was used for the analysis regarding (congenital or

acquired) disability, parents' gender and education level, and students' gender and age. A one-way ANOVA was used to investigate possible differences existing in terms of disability type. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

An examination of the scores from the Attitude Toward Inclusion/ Mainstreaming Scale showed acceptable internal consistency of the factors benefits, satisfaction and rights. The rate of Cronbach's alpha was rated between .61 (for rights) and .75 (for benefits). A moderate internal consistency was noticed regarding ability. Furthermore, association estimates among factors revealed a positive correlation between benefits and rights and between ability and satisfaction (Table 2).

Between parents of children with congenital and acquired disability, statistically significant differences were noticed regarding their attitudes on the benefits factor (Table 3).

Students' age appeared as an important factor providing statistically significant differences regarding parents' views in all subscales of the questionnaire (Table 4).

Statistically significant differences were also observed between parents of boys and girls on the rights factor (Table 5).

No differences were noted on the subscales of the questionnaire related to parents' sex and educational level and children's type of disability.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that most parents of children with disabilities have positive attitudes toward inclusion and support the concept of mainstreaming. An examination of the responses to the items expressing benefits showed that 65% of the parents recognise that inclusion will prepare their children's adjustment in the real world, giving them a chance to participate (63.9%) and interact with other classmates. Positive social outcomes were also recognised for children without disabilities who are likely to learn and become more sensitive to peoples' differences (82.2%). Interestingly enough, children's attitudes was not a major concern for parents. 42.4% of parents did not seem to consider that inclusion is likely to harm the sentimental development of their children, as 52.5% of them expressed the belief that inclusion is more likely to make their children feel better about themselves. However, parents were uncertain or expressed a concern about whether inclusion would lead to their child's social isolation by other children in a typical class.

Children's social acceptance along with quality of instruction and availability of support services seem to puzzle parents' views and create a feeling of uncertainty. Perceptions whether children with disabilities are more (33%) or less (40%) to receive special help and services and whether teachers in

conventional classes are able (23.5%) or not able (43%) to help children with disabilities, give a first but not yet clear picture of parents' views, as approximately 30% of parents remained undecided about teacher ability and possible loss of support services in typical settings. This can be attributed to the fact that inclusion is still at a stage of an early development in Greece. Consequently, parents of children with disabilities are not yet certain about the positive or negative outcomes of inclusion practices, although benefits of inclusion for students according to parents' perceptions are positively related to children's rights from a philosophical and legal standpoint. Indeed, parents strongly support their children's chance to participate in conventional classes (68%) and to have the same advantages and rights (83.2%) as children without disabilities, especially parents of boys who express a greater support toward children's rights compared to parents of girls ($p = .013$).

An important finding is that only a 27.3% of parents express their satisfaction with special classes' services, something that raises an issue about parents' approval of special education provision in Greek settings. Parents' satisfaction with their child's progress and special education services compared to inclusion was moderately correlated to their perceptions about teacher ability and inclusion support by parents of students without disabilities. A larger percentage of parents (47%) did not seem to support that special support can lead their children to a faster skills development compared to traditional practices, or that that special education is taught better by special professors. Moreover, parents appeared more confident (47.5%) about the equal treatment of their children provided by teachers in typical classes and more positive (56.3%) about their children's acceptance by parents of children without disabilities.

Between parents of children with congenital and acquired disability statistically significant difference was noted regarding their views only on the benefits factor, with parents of children with acquired disability expressing more positive attitudes toward benefits of inclusion ($p = 0.22$).

The most important factor providing statistically significant differences regarding parents' views in all subscales of the questionnaire was students' age. In particular, parents of children aged below 18 years achieved higher scores in all subscales compared to parents whose children were already adults. In other words, parents of younger children appeared more concerned and related to the concept of inclusion as the higher scores related to their perceptions about inclusion indicate. In Greece, the critical period for students who are usually educated in special school settings (as in the case of children of this study) is until they reach their 16th year of age and complete their basic education phase. During this period, the education progress of each child determines to a great degree his/her opportunities for inclusion as well as the continuance of his/her education in centers of professional preparation for

people with disabilities. Accordingly, the results of this study show that the concept of inclusion appeals more to parents who are more concerned about the future of their younger children, compared to parents whose children are already adults and their possibilities for inclusion in society are already recognised to some extent.

In summary, the findings of this study reveal that:

- The parents of this study do not express a major concern about whether inclusion would hurt their child emotionally. However they are concerned whether their children would be socially accepted by other peers without disabilities.
- Quality of instruction and availability of support services create a feeling of uncertainty to parents of children with disabilities about the positive or negative outcomes of inclusion practices. Nevertheless, parents strongly support their children's chance to participate in typical classes, an attitude that to some degree is attributed to their frustration regarding the provision of special policies in Greece.
- Parents appear more confident as regards to equal treatment of their children by teachers in typical classes and their children's acceptance by parents of peers without disabilities.
- Students' age emerged as the principal factor that influenced parents' perceptions about inclusion, with parents of students aged below 18 years appearing more emotionally involved and concerned about the future of their children through inclusion practices.
- Parents' education level and children's type of disability did not emerge as factors that influenced parental views about inclusion.

A limitation of this study is that the data were collected from parents whose children were placed only in special schools. Due to the fact that inclusion practices are still at the first stages of development in Greece, parents of children with disabilities already educated in typical education settings could not be found. Thus, parents of this study were asked to complete the questionnaire by having in mind a hypothetical situation of their children been educated along with other peers without disabilities.

This study is a first attempt to provide several implications for future research and practice in Greek education settings. Future research with larger samples that will include parents of children with mild disabilities already included in conventional classes is needed. Researchers and school districts need to continue to examine beliefs regarding inclusion by parents of students in different disability types as part of an on-going evaluation of inclusive practices in Greece.

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Table 1. The Attitude Toward Inclusion/ Mainstreaming Scale (Leyser and Kirk, 2004)

Items	Factors
1. The inclusion is more likely to prepare disabled children better for their adjustment in the real world.	Benefit
2. The inclusion is more likely to make disabled children to feel better with them selves.	
3. The inclusion gives disabled children a chance to participate in a wide variety of activities.	
4. The inclusion is more likely to prepare the classmates, who do not face disabilities, for the real world.	
5. Through inclusion is more likely for non disabled children to learn about peoples' differences.	
13. The inclusion is likely to harm the sentimental development of disabled children.	
14. A disabled child will feel isolated by other not disabled children in a conventional class.	
6. Through inclusion disabled children are less likely to take special help and individualised guidance.	Ability & Support
7. During inclusion disabled children are less likely to receive special services such as physiotherapy or logo therapy.	
9. Teachers in conventional traditional schools are able to adjust their schedule so as to help disabled children who have already embodied.	
10. Teachers in traditional schools cannot realise how to embody disabled children in their classes.	
8. I' m more satisfied with my child's progression in a special class than in an ordinary class.	Satisfaction
11. Disabled students will develop skills faster in a special class than in a traditional one.	
12. Special education is taught better by special professors than other Professors.	
16. Teachers of conventional classes behave to parents of disabled children differently compared to other parents.	
18. I feel that parents of not disabled children don't want disabled children to be in the same class with their children.	
12. Disabled children should be given the chance to participate in conventional classes whenever this is possible.	Rights
17. I feel that my disabled child should have the same advantages and rights as the not disabled children have.	

Table 2. Correlations and Internal Consistency of the Factors

	Benefits	Ability	Satisfy	α
Benefits				,7512
Ability	0,139			,5206
Satisfaction	0,109	,401**		,6811
Rights	,443**	-,022	-,101	,6139

Note: ** $p < .01$

Table 3. Disability differences

Factors	Disability	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Benefits							
congenital	101	3.45	.76	-1.89	113	.022	
acquired	14	3.85	.53	-2.47	21.28		

Table 4. Student age differences

Factors	Student Age	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Benefits							
	Children	76	3.65	.71	2.97	117	.004
	Adults	43	3.23	.75	2.91	81.12	
Ability							
	Children	76	3.12	.61	4.08	117	.000
	Adults	43	2.62	.65	4.01	82.99	
Satisfaction							
	Children	76	2.94	.74	4.71	117	.000
	Adults	43	2.25	.78	4.64	83.94	
Rights							
	Children	76	4.46	.72	4.40	117	.000
	Adults	43	3.74	1.04	3.98	64.81	

Table 5. Factor differences between parents of boys and girls

Factors	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Rights							
	Boys	75	4.36	.76	2.51	117	.013
	girls	44	3.93	1.08	2.30	64.26	