

## INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED STUDENTS. EDUCATION INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN GREECE\*

Panagiotis GIAVRIMIS<sup>1</sup>

10.52846/AUCPP.2023.2.08

### **Abstract**

*Inclusive education can be an effective policy reform to tackle educational underachievement and address societal and pedagogical exclusion. Inclusive education encompasses supporting individuals to experience a sense of belonging in the educational community; promotes the reduction of exclusion, discrimination, and learning barriers; and encourages the inclusion and transformation of culture, education policies, and school practices to respond equitably to the diversity of the student population. The present paper focuses on the views of secondary school teachers on the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. Twenty-five secondary school teachers participated in the study, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The research results showed that our study's teachers were ambivalent about inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities. Firstly, the manifestations of their learning or social exclusion are not rare since the Greek education sector with its facilities (material and technological resources, teachers' education and training, information, etc.) is incapable of responding to their growing demands and, secondly, some educators and parents of typical students maintain a negative approach towards disabled students' inclusion in the mainstream school system. It is imperative to develop a democratic education, an education for all which deconstructs the dominant norms of ableism and able-bodyism, supports the training and qualification of teachers and forms a culture of solidarity, mutual respect, and empathy for students with disabilities.*

**Key words:** Teachers; Intellectual disability; Greece; Co-education.

### **1. Introduction**

Severe limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive behaviour in the environment characterise intellectual disability. It is related to limitations in mental, behavioural, and functional skills before age eighteen (AAIDD, 2018). Emphasis is placed on the interaction of individuals with their social context and the ability of

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor PhD, Department of Sociology, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Greece, e-mail address: [giavrimis@soc.aegean.gr](mailto:giavrimis@soc.aegean.gr), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7368-3533>

the environment to adapt to their challenges (Schroeder *et al.*, 2002; W.H.O., 2011). The earlier medical-biological approaches are instrumentalised by transferring responsibility to the individual and ideologised by perpetuating dominant social patterns and policies that govern and manipulate the social experience of disabled persons. The critique of the previous approaches highlighted the theoretical framework of the social model of disability as the dominant approach of reference (Oliver, 1990; 2009). In the social model paradigm, intellectual disability is conceptualised as a social construct, providing an alternative way for these individuals to approach their social interaction and coexistence (Logeswaran *et al.*, 2019; Rapley, 2004). The social exclusion of disabled persons is not the outcome of their disability but rather the result of mainstream social constructions of disability (Barnes & Sheldon, 2010; Oliver, 2009). In the context of the theoretical studies beyond the Social Model, several theoretical approaches were developed that emphasised different aspects of the delimitations and interpretations of disability and the accessibility of disabled people to social resources. The mismatched relationship between person and environment and the relativisation of the conceptualisation of disability (Relational Model of Disability), the focus on human diversity as opposed to the emphasis on the distinction between ability and disability (Diversity Model of Disability), and the treatment of disability as a globalised and human phenomenon rather than as a minority issue, as well as the emphasis on the rights of disabled people, especially concerning the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in the application of institutional arrangements to everyday life and policy decisions (Human Rights Model of Disability) were among the most essential theoretical conceptualisations of disability issues (Jackson, 2018; Lawson & Beckett, 2021; Levitt, 2017).

Inclusive education is developed through epistemological conceptualisations, the movement actions and the demands of people with disabilities for equal accessibility to social resources (Lidiya, 2016; Shume, 2023). Inclusive education can be an effective policy reform to tackle educational underachievement and address societal and pedagogical exclusion (Slee, 2011). Inclusive education encompasses supporting individuals to experience a sense of belonging in the educational community; promotes the reduction of exclusion, discrimination, and learning barriers; and encourages the inclusion and transformation of culture, education policies, and school practices to respond equitably to the diversity of the student population (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Gavish, & Shimoni, 2013). Similarly, the 2017 Guide to Ensuring Equity in Education approaches inclusive education as a process for overcoming barriers and constraints to ensure that all learners can participate in school success (UNESCO, 2017, p. 7).

Democracy in pedagogical and teaching reality finds its actual application in inclusive education. In the school context, learning concerns all students, who are included as equal actors (Mullins, 2019). Inclusive education forms a framework for transforming and deconstructing the cultural superiority of the non-disabled and the objective reality and promotes social equity and acceptance of diversity (Ballard, 1997). Inclusive education fields of reference are radical reconsiderations of

educational policies, ideologies, pedagogical methods and curricula (Skidmore, 2004). Inclusive education does not remain in the simple approach of "normalising" divergences but goes in-depth into the reasons behind the decisions and the practices imposed. It is a transformation of 'normality', a subversion of established social patterns of the dominant ideology of elites, the superiority of competence, and the illusion of meritocracy. It concerns a dynamic deconstruction process of the positivist-biological model of education approach (Slee, 2011).

## **2. Educational Policy for the Inclusion of Persons with intellectual disabilities in Contemporary Greece**

Policy fragmentation for including people with disabilities characterised the legislative and implementing regulations in the last century. Private actors, institutions (e.g., the church), and state structures formed a network of inadequate and circumstantial policies toward people with intellectual disabilities. Law 4397/1929 established schools for intellectually disabled children, and in 1937, Law 453 set up in Athens the first special needs school (Stasinou, 1991). The Medical-Biological model dominates, and terms such as 'normality', 'deviation', 'retardation', and 'abnormality' are part of the public discourse and reflect social representations of disability (Andreou, 1998). In 1981, the first Law concerning special needs education was enacted (1143/1981). Early in the 20th century, Law 2817 made several reforms regarding disabled students' learning and inclusion in formal schools. Central to this is the recognition by the state of the mandatory education of these students by the mainstream education model (Article 2, par. 1). Moreover, the Pedagogical Institute created curricula for students with severe, moderate or mild intellectual disabilities in 2004. Law 3699/2008 addresses shortcomings in the national educational policy for persons with disabilities. It prepared society to accept them so they could be included smoothly and contribute actively.

During the 2009-2010 school year in Greece, 9272 students with intellectual disabilities were enrolled in special needs education. However, official data on intellectual disability is lacking in the national population, making assessing Greece's present condition challenging (Anagnostopoulos & Soumaki, 2011). Despite this, the implemented policy in education is often fragmented and ambivalent and, on many occasions, lacks the will to enact legislation or enforce the right to equal education for persons with disabilities in everyday school practice by the laws and regulations. The Greek Ombudsman (2015) stresses that the challenges of Special Needs Education are profound short staffing, insufficient instructional support for disabled students and poor material and technical facilities. Those mentioned above exacerbate social disparities, stigma, social segregation, social class distinction and the physicalisation of disabled persons' social traits (Chronopoulou-Pantazi, 2011). The superficial recognition of the rights of people with disabilities characterises the Greek policy. There is a difference between the rights expressed in laws and those applied in the educational practice of school reality. Democratic and equal accessibility in education is shaped through a hidden discourse based on ableism and the shifting of responsibility in many situations to

the individuals themselves and their families. Disability is not perceived as a diversity of human existence but as a minority issue or a non-normative form. The conceptualisations of professionals and institutional actors shape even more barriers to their accessibility to education (Giavrimis, 2020; Sakellariou *et al.*, 2019; Stergiadou, 2022; Samsari *et al.*, 2022).

### **3. Greek teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education**

Studies of teachers' attitudes towards the co-education of people with disabilities in mainstream schools in Greece indicate that teachers have a generally positive attitude (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014), with mainstream education teachers being more reluctant than special needs education teachers and disagreeing with the latter about their responsibilities in implementing parallel support (Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2015). Teachers appear to have more positive attitudes regarding co-education for mild cases of people with disabilities. At the same time, they have a negative opinion regarding inclusive education for people with severe disabilities, primarily if inclusion is related to their classroom. The student's functioning facilitates teachers' positive attitudes towards a student with a disability (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), class size (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2017), and the presence of supporting staff. Moreover, it is revealed that an essential role in forming teachers' attitudes toward co-education is played by their experience of contact with special education and people with disabilities (Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010). Teachers with positive attitudes may be the ones who have had pleasant experiences with people with disabilities, whereas those with negative attitudes may have had unpleasant experiences (Koutrouba *et al.*, 2008). In addition, a) younger teachers are more favourable than older teachers (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014); b) teachers with fewer years of experience had more positive attitudes (Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2015); c) primary teachers were more positive than secondary teachers; and d) teacher self-efficacy, stress, and coping strategies have an important role in teacher attitudes towards co-education (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014).

In addition, teachers in mainstream education have repeatedly expressed their need to gain more knowledge about children with disabilities. While it is evident from research that teachers' professional training does not help them to cope with such situations (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014). Furthermore, due to inadequate training, most teachers cannot cope with cases of people with disabilities in a teaching pedagogical way (Koutrouba *et al.*, 2006).

This study explores secondary school teachers' conceptualisations regarding teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education of people with intellectual disabilities and Greek educational policy. The research questions were the attitudes of the educational community towards the educational integration of people with intellectual disabilities and the characteristics of the Greek educational policy.

### **4. Method**

Qualitative research was considered the most appropriate for this study, as the focus on individuals' views and interpretations was essential. Qualitative analysis

allows for an in-depth study of social phenomena, aiming at analytical observation and reflection. The main aim is to understand human behaviour and lived experiences by acquiring and analysing non-numerical data (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research involves a range of interpretive practices that make the realm discernible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

#### 4.1. Participants

Twenty-five secondary school teachers were selected from Lesbos Island. The research was necessary because there is insufficient research on inclusive education on Lesbos Island. Teachers' conceptualisations of disability mediate social representations of disability in the school context and the inclusion of disabled students. Also, teachers in secondary education need to gain pedagogical qualifications and are only educated in their discipline. Therefore, issues concerning the pedagogical approaches to instruction or dealing with diversity in schools are separate from their universities' curricula. At the same time, their in-service training does not cover special needs education (Giavrimis, 2018). The participants were also selected based on their speciality and work in Lesbos (Greece) in schools with different characteristics (urban-non-urban, large schools-small schools). Also, the demographic variety of the participants was considered, such as their age and years of service (Flick, 2017). Ten of them were male, and fifteen were female.

**Table 1. Demographic of participants**

<i>Years of service</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Secondary category</i>	<i>Education</i>
5-10 years	4	30-40 years old	10
11-20 years	8	40-50 years old	11
16-25 years	7	50 years and over	4
26 years and over	6		
		PE02 (philologist)	11
		PE11 ((sport teacher)	2
		PE03 (mathematician)	3
		PE04 (physics teacher)	2
		PE06 (English teacher)	3
<i>Area</i>			
Urban	16		
Countryside	9		

#### 4.2. Means of data collection

Qualitative research was considered the most appropriate for this study, as the focus on individuals' views and interpretations was essential. The semi-structured interview was used as the research instrument since it provided the necessary flexibility to the researcher to conduct the research and the analyses of various aspects of the phenomenon. During the research process, the ethical issues (anonymity, consent protocol, right of withdrawal, notification of results) of the research implementation were respected (BERA, 2011). The interviews had an average duration of 38 min. The interview guide was constructed based on theoretical models of disability (Oliver, 1990; 2009; Slee, 2011), the research on intellectual disabilities (e.g., Malki & Einat, 2018), the globalised context of

education (Green, 2010), and the organisation of the special needs education in Greece (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Chronopoulou-Pantazi, 2011; Kourkoutas *et al.*, 2017; Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014). The interview guide included thematic areas related to the concept of disability, policies for the inclusion of disabled people, the attitudes of teachers, students and parents and the difficulties of inclusion of intellectually disabled students. In particular, the interview guide focused on four thematic axes: a) the conceptualisation of disability, b) educational policies for inclusive education, c) teachers' attitudes towards including people with intellectual disabilities in the mainstream education system and d) barriers and difficulties of inclusive education. Qualitative research focuses on forming categories and subcategories through the discourse of the subjects so that, in a dialectical way, we can deepen our understanding of social reality (Tsiolis, 2014).

### **4.3. Research procedure**

After contacting the interviewees, interviews were conducted during the 2021-2022 school year. Ethical issues were addressed during the interview (e.g., consent to participate, anonymity, accurate recording of what was mentioned, and no bartering) (Kyriazi, 2010). In this study, the thematic analysis method was chosen, meaning patterns were identified, and codes of analysis, subcategories and categories of in-depth understanding of the research data were highlighted.

The limitations of the research related to the lack of generalisability of the findings and the location of the study on the island of Lesbos. Another limitation is the focus of the research on secondary school teachers. Further research on students or parents would also help to achieve a comparative study between the groups.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. Attitudes towards inclusive education**

According to our findings, teachers are ambivalent about including students with intellectual disabilities in general education. Moreover, several teachers argue more strongly against a mainstreaming strategy for intellectually disabled persons. These emerge through their discourse, and their opinions vary from favourable and democratically oriented to adverse and contradictory:

*“I am very, very positive! I think it gives a lot to the children, especially those struggling and having particular difficulties.” (E8)*

*“I find intellectual disability more difficult than any other disability, er, because the person has a real problem in communicating and taking in what is being taught..... ”. (E11)*

Most of the teachers in our research said that many students with intellectual disabilities are excluded. They mentioned that intellectually disabled students excluded or not participating in education represent over one-half of their total population. Levels of the severity of the intellectual disability appear to be a determining factor in this: “... *pupils with moderate and above disabilities and severe mental retardation should attend special schools as the mainstream school does not benefit them*”. (E14)

It is clear from the research data available in Greece that many disabled people are excluded from education either because they do not participate in it or do not receive appropriate education when included in it (Giavrimis, 2018; OLME, 2008). Furthermore, the teachers in our research stated that intellectually disabled students have difficulties within the educational system several times due to discrimination and prejudice (e.g., parents of typical students):

*“Well, for example, in the case of the child I was working with, the other children were very supportive; they knew him from previous classes and had “embraced” him, let us put it that way. However, on the other hand, there are, of course, many cases of children who act out to be made fun of; it is something diverse from them, so I think it is more or less the family that plays a role in each child and how they deal with a child who is diverse from them.” (E21)*

*“..... parents are also important in the way they teach their children to treat people with disabilities ... they believe that they will affect their children's achievement.” (E2)*

Also, significant others within the educational setting frequently need more supportive social capital. Their ambivalence and negativity often impede the learning-disabled students' transition to social inclusion.

## **5.2. Education policy on inclusive education**

Teachers mentioned the shortcomings of official services in providing relevant information on including persons with disabilities. They stressed the need for various social agencies to provide more information to the public about the skills of an intellectually disabled person. However, they felt that increased awareness of intellectual disability from various stakeholders had occurred in recent years. Nevertheless, teachers stated that their knowledge and the training they have received need to be completed or have significant shortcomings. They felt their training was essential for the inclusive education of intellectually disabled students.

*“I think that the state does not have a clear position. Basically, yes, the institution of parallel support has been introduced, the institution of inclusion has been introduced, things that in our years, that is, twenty years ago, thirty years ago, did not exist, so this effort has been made, but the appropriate information has not been provided, i.e., some teachers have several years of experience who do not know these institutions and cannot use them in their classroom.” (E14)*

*“... some small efforts have been made, but valuable information is unavailable, there is no proper organisation, and the school's plan is unclear. So, if we want to be formally correct, we have a long way to go.” (E20)*

Insufficient training is a barrier and a source of teachers' anxiety and uncertainty: *“As I have mentioned, I think that there is a lack of training for mainstream teachers and that there should be ongoing and mandatory training...” (E4)*

Teachers point out the shortcomings and existing conditions regarding infrastructure, organisational issues, curricula and contemporary instruction methods that hinder the inclusion of intellectually disabled students in the mainstream education system:

*“I think that at least the curricula that existed until now, because they are now being renewed as far as I know, were not so supportive of these children; there is no provision for individualised teaching and differentiated teaching... because, in general, you can set these kinds of conditions, but the ones that the Ministry of Education is demanding at the moment are not corresponding to what is happening in the actual classroom, nor are the facilities available in some schools...” (E3)*

## **6. Discussion**

This study explores secondary school teachers' conceptualisations regarding teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education of people with intellectual disabilities and Greek educational policy.

The findings of our research highlight that a) teachers are ambivalent about including students with intellectual disabilities in general education, b) most of the teachers in our research said that many students with intellectual disabilities are excluded, and c) according to teachers views intellectually disabled students have difficulties within the educational system several times due to discrimination and prejudice (e.g., parents of typical students). Teachers' discourse in our research reflects the contradictory situation where rhetoric about inclusive education is found in institutional or public discourse but needs to be implemented in educational praxis. Disabled people's societal and pedagogical exclusion derives from the way existing institutional and cultural frameworks and dominant social constructs function (Barnes & Sheldon, 2010).

Also, teachers stated that: a) shortcomings of official services in providing relevant information on including persons with disabilities, b) their knowledge and the training they have received need to be completed or have significant shortcomings, c) insufficient training is a barrier and a source of teachers' anxiety and uncertainty and d) there are the shortcomings and existing conditions regarding infrastructure, organisational issues, curricula and contemporary instruction methods that hinder the inclusion of intellectually disabled students in the mainstream education system. From Greek and international data, it appears that disabled people are faced, in various fields of social life and especially in education, with the reflections of the dominant discourse in social representations and the derived perceptions and stereotypes about their ability. These often contribute to their educational culture (Genova, 2015; Mavropalias *et al.*, 2019; Oliver, 1990). Inadequate management, along with the weak organisational structure of education administration (Genova, 2015; Mavropalias *et al.*, 2019), as well as the continuous educational policy reform efforts that follow governmental and political changes (Grolios *et al.*, 2021), further intensify the existing challenges faced by students with intellectual disabilities (Greek Ombudsman, 2015). Thus, the logistical



infrastructure and teacher training do not add value to teachers' actions and conceptualisations (Mavropalias & Anastasiou, 2016). Hence, the issue of inclusive education is separate from their discourse or their movement demands. Furthermore, pedagogical and instructional methods and the attitudes of mainstream schoolteachers maintain the segregation of the historical past ("mainstream education - special needs education"). Therefore, education for all projects or democratisation of education favouring the underprivileged is not feasible. On the contrary, education is crucial for perpetuating social stratification and learning marginalisation in this context (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Teachers approached the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities due to their lived experience in a normalised system of evaluation criteria for typical student behaviour. However, globalised norms, the symbolic violence of arbitrary categorisations imposed by the pressure of ableism, and the idealisation of ability objectives school reality by excluding different interpretations. Accountability and efficiency, the new principles of national policies, form risky and alienating settings for educators (Green, 2010). At the same time, the educational unreadiness of teachers facing such cases of poor training and qualification facilitates and perpetuates, regardless of laws, the medical-biological model (Slee, 2011). Moreover, separating teachers into qualified and non-qualified teachers evokes the latter's fear and insecurity about their pedagogical and teaching competence (Slee, 2003).

The responsibility for the shortcomings and the failure to address the issues raised in the contemporary educational context is shifted to the disabled person, who has to cope with their difficulties independently (Fyssa *et al.*, 2014). However, the welfare state cannot protect those individuals in greatest need and takes fragmentary measures (e.g., allowances, parallel support, the right to participate in mainstream education restricted cases) while denying teachers and other members of the educational community the flexibility to adopt instructional or pedagogical decisions that would challenge mainstream patterns of daily educational praxis.

In conclusion, our study's teachers were ambivalent about inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities. Firstly, the manifestations of their learning or social exclusion are not rare since the Greek education sector with its facilities (material and technological resources, teachers' education and training, information, etc.) is incapable of responding to their growing demands and, secondly, some educators and parents of typical students maintain a negative approach towards disabled students' inclusion in the mainstream school system. The teachers' perspective shifts the responsibility of the difficulties of the persons with intellectual disabilities to the disabled persons and indirectly to their families, providing a false image of their social presence. The stigmatisation that accompanies the conceptualisation of disability further legitimises society's attitude. Intellectual disability is an example of anomie, a contradiction with the dominant social structure that should be corrected to be functional and adaptive (Koutantos, 2000). The individual is marginalised from the social environment and is distanced from social reality. This model's individual-centred and causative approach fails to produce an "intra-social" interpretation of disability. The de-legitimization of the 'reification' of

the responsibility of intellectually disabled persons and the highlighting of the obligations and adaptation of the structural features of the social context in which the disabled person is placed are some of the most prominent premises of contemporary education (Giavrimis, 2018; Oliver, 1990; 2009). Therefore, it is imperative to develop a democratic education, an education for all, which deconstructs the dominant norms of ableism and able-bodyism, supports the training and qualification of teachers and forms a culture of solidarity, mutual respect, and empathy for students with disabilities (Mullins, 2019). At the same time, to implement an inclusive education policy, awareness of the population regarding acceptability and equitable coexistence with diversity is required.

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