

# Democratic Pedagogy and Inclusive Education in Greece

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**Abstract:** Inclusion is the educational method that enables the effective integration of all children despite their different needs and abilities and irrespective of their social backgrounds. Inclusion is based on the principle of equal opportunities and the establishment of a democratic school. It helps to combat the phenomenon of isolation of groups of children, and its implementation concerns all those involved with the school: pupils, parents, teachers, administration, etc.

**Keywords:** democratic values, pedagogy, inclusive education, integration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The democratic classroom should operate as a place where the pupil's personality develops and processes of humanization, individualization and socialisation take place. In the context of the democratic classroom, the matter of the active position and role of the pupil has a special place. Historically, the active position of the student in learning process has attracted the attention of many teachers in various socio-economic and scientific-pedagogical contexts[1].

Modern education, especially in the pre-school context, which is characterized by flexibility, could contribute to the development of citizenship and democratic education. Pre-school education acts as a catalyst for the development of today's young children as future political engaged citizens through active and creative participation in educational activities. Citizenship and democratic education are related to the development of dialogue, freedom, peace and values such as ethics, tolerance, justice, equality and respect for diversity. These values contribute to the development of the child's thinking in an educational climate of freedom, autonomy, participation and self-expression. They also develop the skills of reasoning and critical thinking, promoting the creativity of pre-school children. [2],[3],[4].

Pre-school teachers are a key parameter for the development of a democratic environment in the classroom. Their views, perceptions and attitudes towards democratic education influence the development of students' democratic skills. The importance of the influence of interpersonal relationships, communication and interaction between teachers and students has been pedagogically documented. Therefore, the adoption of democratic ideals and the personal example of preschool teachers who embrace and implement the democratic model of education influence and shape the skills of dialogue and mutual respect [2].

Although there is no comprehensive list of democratic practices, research demonstrates a range of curricula, methodologies and issues related to the educational context that aim to develop equity, sound judgement, action and cooperation. A logical conclusion would be that the more of these practices teachers implement, the more democratic their pedagogy becomes [5], [6].

## 2. AIM

The aim of this paper is to present the institutional framework for inclusion in Greece and the results and difficulties of its implementation. The method followed is the critical bibliographic review of research studies published after 2000 in scientific journals and websites, and laws and agreements related to the inclusive education framework. The research findings show that the main strategy for

implementing inclusive education for students with special educational needs and disabilities in Greece is that of special parallel support. The advantage of this form of inclusion is that the student can attend all the lessons in the regular classroom without being separated from the rest of the class. In practice, in the regular school, inclusion is usually applied through differentiated teaching, i.e. specialized educational adaptations in the learning process that enable all students to respond in an active way. Overall, the implementation of inclusion in Greek schools has produced positive results, and an increasing number of teachers are starting to adopt inclusive pedagogical principles in their classrooms.

### 3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The review includes research studies and academic theses published after 2000 in scientific journals and websites: Google Scholar, Pub Med, Electronic Library of the University of West Attica. It also includes laws published in the Greek Government Gazette and International Agreements related to the inclusive education.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive education is a key part of a democracy as democracy establishes its credibility through its ability to attract all citizens to it. However, societies that claim to be democratic find many ways to exclude. Schools are no exception to this process [7]. Exclusionary attitudes are also sustained through family norms, employment structure and a range of policies and practices that lead to discrimination based on class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender. Exclusion is the logical consequence of all this. Achieving inclusion requires the implementation of a well-constructed theory [7]. According to the Ombudsman, “*from the contact with schoolchildren, it is noted that few are aware of their rights, their application in everyday life and the ways of defending them*”. The Ombudsman has repeatedly recommended that all school levels should provide pupils with adequate education on children's rights in an organized and systematic way, through engaging, participatory and experiential teaching methods. Children should be educated on the exercise and defense of children's rights, with appropriate teaching aids and modern participatory educational methods" [8].

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child protects the right of every child to have access to appropriate and quality education, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities (art.2, art.28, Law 2101/92, Government Gazette A192), defining the concept of quality by establishing specific educational targets (art.29, Law 2101/92, Government Gazette A192).

Education, therefore, should not focus solely on the acquisition of general knowledge but should be student-centred, i.e. it should promote the overall development of every child's personality and abilities, be adapted to their particular needs on the basis of their development, encourage autonomy, and prepare them for life in a society aiming for understanding, acceptance, equality and respect for human rights. All children have the right to education and participation without any discrimination [8].

At the international level, the existing legal framework is based on declarations and agreements supporting educational inclusion, upon which states plan their actions for its implementation. One of the most important declarations on inclusive education is the Salamanca Statement (1994), signed by twenty-five international organisations. It emphasizes that inclusion should be implemented in the setting of the regular school, which should be a main actor in creating equal opportunities for all children to combat discrimination and negative environments [9]. Another important agreement is that of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. All EE countries, the USA and Australia now implement legislation designed to promote inclusive education [10].

Exploring inclusion from different perspectives requires an interdisciplinary approach. In Greek, the term inclusive education is often translated as *co-education* and *non-exclusion education* to replace the term integration [11]. Inclusion is not solely the work of the individual teacher; to be effective, it should be taken up by all the involved institutions and structures and the individuals that make them up [12].

The most fundamental definition of inclusive education was provided by UNESCO (2009): Inclusion is defined as ‘a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation, cultivating learning and communities, and reducing and

eliminating exclusion in and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a shared vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and the belief that it is the responsibility of the system to educate all children" (pp. 8-9) [13].

According to UNESCO (1994), pre-school education is a crucial period for the early identification, assessment and encouragement of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities. Moreover, it appears to be a favorable context for the early development of abilities in all children. With inclusion, on the one hand, students with special educational needs or disabilities can be supported in a common developmental framework, while on the other hand, students without special educational needs or disabilities can learn to understand and respect both individual differences and acquire social skills by interacting with students with special educational needs or disabilities [14].

In Greece, inclusion in regular education schools is mostly applied through specialized educational adaptations in the learning process so that all students can respond in an active way. However, barriers to this process can be created by all those who make up and participate in the inclusive process, including parents and teachers and the perceptions and attitudes of the school and the local community. Difficulties may also be caused by the existing Curriculum - Interdisciplinary Integrated Curriculum Framework. Children's interaction in the classroom plays an important role in the implementation of educational inclusion. Regular and special education teachers should put a great deal of effort in ensuring that these factors do not work as barriers [15].

The inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities has changed significantly over the years and continues to change as the whole framework, i.e. perceptions, practical methods, curricula and policies, are changing worldwide. In Greece, this change started with the separate education of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the setting of the special school throughout the 1980-90s, which was later extended to pre-school age, with Law 3699/2008 with Early Intervention Classes i.e. special kindergartens, usually attached to special primary schools. Special kindergarten pupils can attend these classes until the age of seven [16], [17].

A positive step towards inclusion was the establishment of integration classes introduced by Law 1566/1985 within the framework of the regular school (from kindergarten to high school) [16],[17]. A more decisive step towards inclusive education was the enactment of Law 3699/2008 on Special Needs Education and Education of Students with Disabilities or with Special Educational Needs, which refers to special parallel support and integration classes. Specifically, in integration classes, students are grouped according to the type and level of their special educational needs, upon which general and specialized programs are planned. Inclusive classes are attended by pupils with special educational needs or disabilities who also attend an individualized educational support program. Students move from the general to the inclusion class, where they are assisted by the special education teacher during specified hours and lessons per week. Inclusive classes are typically attended by 1-5 students and are designed to fully integrate them into the general classroom [18]. However, experts' opinions vary; some teachers believe that inclusive classes contribute to social isolation and that the separate education these pupils receive does not always contribute to their all-round development [19].

Inclusion is not only about the integration of pupils with special needs. It also attempts to undo the separation between special and regular education based on the principle that every child should have a place in the regular school. However, changing the school setting from special to regular is not enough for the implementation of inclusion; emphasis should be placed on educational adaptations within the classrooms and schools [20]. Literature on inclusive education emphasizes the changes that need to take place so that the school can become inclusive for these students as well.

Special parallel support is the main form of inclusive education in Greece, and it operates within the framework of the regular school at all levels. With the appropriate assistance from the parallel support teacher, a student with special educational needs can attend all lessons in the regular classroom. The regular and special education teachers are co-responsible for differentiating the lessons based on the student's needs[21]. However, when it comes to pre-school age, this only applies to kindergartens, not nursery schools -that is, after the children have reached the age of four.

Regarding the inclusion policy for students from other countries, the action taken by the Ministry of Education and the Pedagogical Institute is mainly aimed at primary and secondary school age groups.

At these grades, there is a corresponding legislative framework which provides for the establishment of Reception Classes, Intercultural Schools, Reception Classes of Priority Education Zones, etc. Based on UN guidelines and international conventions, principles such as equality, elimination of discrimination, tolerance, social justice and mutual respect between peoples and cultures are promoted [22].

### 5. THE RESULTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In Greece, not much research has been done on the implementation of inclusion in early childhood education. In their survey of 55 state day care centres, Polyzoï and Polychronopoulou found that a significant number of infants, toddlers and pre-school children with special needs are not adequately served [23]. Similarly, a recent study has found that the extent of participation of children with disabilities in learning/academic and social activities is greatly affected by teachers' personal views and their knowledge about inclusion and co-education, and by the kind, nature and quality of the strategies used [24].

However, certain encouraging results support the efforts of an increasing number of teachers to implement inclusion, especially in elementary education [25], [26]. It should be noted that children with special educational needs and disabilities seem to respond positively to such efforts, which help them develop their social and academic skills [27].

### 6. BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GREECE

The difficulties concerning the implementation of inclusion in Greece are mainly due to:

- (1) The limited access to the basic early care and education system [28];
- (2) The inadequate resources in a society that struggles with a poverty rate of 23.1% (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2014);
- (3) The different assimilative and individualised approaches to disability applied by pre-school teachers;
- (4) The limited content of basic teacher education programmes, neglecting inclusive practices.

However, the scarcity of empirical studies on this topic means that it is difficult to assess the capacity of early childhood education programmes to achieve inclusion [29].

The successful implementation of inclusion in a school setting requires the collaboration of all stakeholders. It is a given that developing successful collaborative practices that involve all stakeholders in an equal manner is a complex process, which proves to be a difficult task even for countries in which it has been institutionally and structurally supported. Cooperation is the result of collective action and a number of skills. It is established under certain conditions and requires time, guidance, facilitation and support. Moreover, it is directly related to practice and requires significant changes in organisational structures, roles and responsibilities [25].

Several steps need to be taken to make inclusion more effective. Several studies highlight the necessity of organizing training programs to develop the potential for implementing inclusive education [30]. In addition, school psychologists and other specialists should collaborate with teachers and parents to provide appropriate training and specialized knowledge about strengthening their relationships with students and promoting a positive way of communication [31]. In order to improve their effectiveness, teachers should be actively involved in decision-making processes related to the school's educational policy, in curriculum design and even in the organization of training programme [26].

### 7. CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is based on the basic democratic values of participation, respect for human dignity and the right to education. It is a form of education that responds to the demand of the provision for appropriate educational programs to enable all students to develop their potential and become competent individuals for themselves and society. However, equal treatment of students with unequal abilities and needs is a very difficult problem. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child

and many guidelines of international organizations emphasize the value of inclusive education, because the benefits of inclusive education accrue to all and to society in general. A defining milestone for inclusive education in Greece was the 3699/2008 law, according to which the structures and procedures for special support for students with special needs or disabilities are provided.

Although the results from the implementation of inclusive education are very positive, there is nevertheless an increased need to overcome some of the obstacles or barriers that still exist, such as the resistance of parents to embrace the philosophy of inclusive education and to work for the benefit of their children and the wider society. Inclusive education as it has been promoted in Greece with the measure of special parallel support for pupils with special educational needs is a challenge for both mainstream and special education teachers, who are required to co-teach in general classes in which pupils with needs are included. The challenge can be addressed through relevant training programs and coaching practices.

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