ObrelaJOURNAL Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience & Mental Health

e-ISSN: 2585-2795 • p-ISSN: 2654-1432
DOI: 10.26386/obrela.v5i4.246
p. 185-193

Inclusion of students with autism in the Greek general school - Teachers' perceptions

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Abstract

In the frame of inclusive education that prevails during the last years most students with special educational needs, including children with autism, attend general schools. The practice of inclusion, however, faces numerous obstacles. The research sample was selected with the random sampling method, using random number tables. It consisted of 100 kindergarten and primary school teachers, 50 from general and 50 from special education, who taught in Greek public schools during the 2018/2019 school year. Given the fact that teachers have a significant impact on the process of inclusive education, this research aims to examine the effect of teachers' position (general/ special education) on their perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism in general schools. According to the data analysis, teachers' position has an impact on some perceptions regarding the specific issue. Regarding the effect of the status (general/special education) of teachers on their perceptions of the inclusion of students with autism, the results of the research showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between them which is highly correlated with the perceptions they have about autism.

Keywords

Inclusive education, students with autism, general education, special education, teachers' perceptions

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1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that can affect various human functions such as cognition, language, social transaction, emotional development etc (Stasinos, 2016). The severity of autism symptoms, as well as its comorbidity with other disorders, varies considerably from person to person. These children, therefore, can be very different from each other and manifest from very mild to severe forms of autism (Echaniz & Cronin, 2014; Haiduc, 2009). Autism usually appears during the first 30 months of a child's life and lasts a lifetime, although symptoms may improve over time with the appropriate treatment (Echaniz & Cronin, 2014; Stasinos, 2016). Furthermore, even though autism is biologically determined, its exact rationale remains unknown (Stasinos, 2016).

Given its complexity, dealing with autism requires specialized intervention from well-trained professionals. These interventions need to keep pace with the developmental course of each child and have continuity throughout his life, according to his needs. In all cases, early intervention, as well as the systematic and consistent use of the appropriate psychological, educational and therapeutic approaches, can lead to a significant improvement (Echaniz & Cronin, 2014).

1.2. The concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education is an applied policy or philosophy of innovative and radical change in all school functions (Stasinos, 2016). It is not limited to placing children with special educational needs in general schools but focuses on the equal participation of all students both in academic and social life, to achieve positive learning outcomes and create the appropriate conditions for their complete social development (Odongo & Davidson, 2016). Consequently, inclusive education protects the right of every child, regardless of cultural or social background, gender, sexual orientation, disability or academic performance, to attend the school of his/ her neighbourhood. Since it is based on the inclusive model, which charges the problem in the educational system and society instead of the individual, it aims to develop the appropriate cultures, policies and practices in schools, to be able to meet the diverse needs of their students (Angelides & Avraamidou, 2011; Angelides & Stylianou, 2011; Stasinos, 2016).

Given the implementation of inclusive education in most countries of the world, the majority of students with special educational needs, including children with autism, attend general schools (Majoko, 2018a). The inclusion of these students has numerous long-term benefits for them, as it improves not only their social, cognitive and communication skills but also their self-image and self-esteem, while it also helps to avoid social stigmatization (Kasidis, 2015; Majoko, 2018b). Inclusive Education also benefits typically developing students since it reinforces empathy, tolerance, and compassion and contributes significantly to the fight against social discrimination concerning disabilities (Kasidis, 2015; Majoko, 2018b).

1.3. Importance of teachers' perceptions and knowledge about Inclusive Education

Although Inclusive Education is now practised almost worldwide, achieving educational equality is still a long way off due to many different factors that undermine it (Angelides, 2011; Finch at all, 2013). The successful implementation of inclusive education is significantly influenced by the inadequacy of special education teachers, who usually do not have the essential knowledge. As a result, they mainly use frontal teaching methods and traditional teaching aids, approaching all students as a single group without personalizing or adapting their teaching. Finally, many teachers are against the inclusion of students with special educational needs in the general school, mostly because they are not properly trained (Pit-ten Cate at all, 2018)

Inclusive Education seems to be significantly influenced by the active participation of teachers. The behaviour, work style, theoretical background, teaching practices, relationships and collaborations they develop either with each other or with the students and parents, can either strengthen or impair the process of inclusion (Angelides, 2011; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017). Thus, teachers' positive perceptions and sufficient knowledge are a prerequisite for the development of an inclusive school environment without any exclusion (Angelides, 2011; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017).

1.4. Literature review of the effect of teachers' position on their perceptions and knowledge on the inclusion of students with autism

According to research (Haimour & Obaidat, 2013; Karal & Riccomini, 2016; Kuyini & Mangope, 2011; Lampadari & Garavelas, 2018; Mezquita-Hoyos et al., 2018; Yaraya et al, 2018), the position (general/ special education) in which teachers serve has an impact on both their personal views and knowledge about students with special educational needs and/ or autism and their inclusion in the general school.

A review of the literature shows that teachers display conflicting views regarding the inclusion of students with both special educational needs in general and autism in particular. According to some researchers (Eiserman, Shisler & Healey, 1995; Jerlinder, Danermark & Gill, 2010; Karal & Riccomini, 2016; Odongo & Davidson, 2016), teachers are positive about inclusion, while others (De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011; Padeliadou & Lampropoulou, 1997; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010), many of whom have either a neutral or a negative attitude towards inclusion.

Mezquita-Hoyos et al. (2018) studied the views of 119 general and 88 special education teachers in Mexico regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs. The data obtained showed that those who worked in special education maintained a significantly more positive attitude towards the specific issue compared to their colleagues who worked in general education.

Besides, a study by Lampadari & Garavelas (2018) found that general education teachers, had less positive perceptions about students with autism than special education teachers, while on the other hand, they believed that they were not ready to work in inclusive classrooms and that they needed relevant training. In the same context, Haimour & Obaidat (2013) investigated the knowledge of 391 general and special education teachers in Saudi Arabia concerning autism. According to the findings of this study, general education teachers had poor knowledge of autism and the appropriate teaching practices in contrast to special education teachers, most of whom demonstrated a sufficiently high level of knowledge.

1.5. Aim of the Study

This research aims to investigate the effect of teachers' position (general/ special education) on their perceptions and knowledge about the inclusion of students with autism in general schools.

The research questions are the following:

- How does teachers' position (general/ special education) relate to their perceptions about the inclusion of students?
- How does teachers' position (general/ special education) relate to their perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism in the general school?

2. Method

2.1. Research Process

The questionnaires investigating the effect of teachers' position on their perceptions and knowledge about the inclusion of students with autism in general schools were provided online, through Google Forms, to general and special education teachers working in kindergartens and primary schools, with the use of the random sampling method. Teachers had to answer all questions, as they were mandatory. Before starting to fill out the questionnaire, they could read the relevant cover letter to be informed about the purpose of the research, as well as the instructions for completing the questionnaire.

2.2. Participants

The research sample was selected with the random sampling method, using random number tables. It consisted of 100 kindergarten and primary school teachers, 50 from general and 50 from special education, who taught in Greek public schools during the 2018/2019 school year. Teachers working in private general and special kindergartens and primary schools were excluded from the population.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Autism Inclusion Questionnaire (Segall, 2008) was used as the data collection tool after it was adjusted according to the research needs. It consists of questions related to teachers' general knowledge, perceptions, experiences and practices regarding the inclusion of students with autism in general school. The original questionnaire comprises six parts, while the modified questionnaire used in the present research does not utilize the three of them.

The final questionnaire includes 32 close-ended questions. Part A contains 9 questions concerning the demographic variables (gender, age) and other personal information of the teachers. Part B is composed of two sections. The first one (Perceptions on the Inclusion of Students with Autism) embodies 8 statements with 5 Likert-type answer options ranging from "I agree" to "I disagree". The option "I neither agree nor disagree" is also provided among them. In the context of these statements, teachers' general attitudes towards the inclusion of students with autism are evaluated. The second section (Knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorders) incorporates 15 statements measuring teachers' knowledge about autism in three main areas: the diagnosis - symptomatology, treatment and rationale. The questions of this section have three answer options: "True", "False" and "I don't know".

2.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed through the statistical software SPSS 19. Descriptive statistics (percentages) were used to describe the sample. The statistics Kendall's tau-c and Spearman Correlation were used to investigate the size of the relationship between the ordinal variables (teachers' perceptions). Teachers' perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism in the general school were the dependent variables, while the position (general/ special education) was the independent variable. The criterion of statistical significance used was a = 0.05.

3. Results

Regarding the effect of teachers' position on their perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism in general schools, in statement 10 the majority of general education teachers disagreed (38%), while the majority of special education teachers either agreed (24%) or maintained a neutral attitude (24%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Crosstab position and statement 10

Crosstab								
Statement 10								
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	5	7	14	19	5	50
		% within Position	10,0%	14,0%	28,0%	38,0%	10,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 10	38,5%	36,8%	56,0%	61,3%	41,7%	50,0%
		% of Total	5,0%	7,0%	14,0%	19,0%	5,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	8	12	11	12	7	50
		% within Position	16,0%	24,0%	22,0%	24,0%	14,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 10	61,5%	63,2%	44,0%	38,7%	58,3%	50,0%
		% of Total	8,0%	12,0%	11,0%	12,0%	7,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	13	19	25	31	12	100
		% within Position	13,0%	19,0%	25,0%	31,0%	12,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 10	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	13,0%	19,0%	25,0%	31,0%	12,0%	100,0%

Table 2. Crosstab position and statement 11

Crosstab								
Statement 11								
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	3	9	16	15	7	50
		% within Position	6,0%	18,0%	32,0%	30,0%	14,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 11	23,1%	42,9%	57,1%	65,2%	46,7%	50,0%
		% of Total	3,0%	9,0%	16,0%	15,0%	7,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	10	12	12	8	8	50
		% within Position	20,0%	24,0%	24,0%	16,0%	16,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 11	76,9%	57,1%	42,9%	34,8%	53,3%	50,0%
		% of Total	10,0%	12,0%	12,0%	8,0%	8,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	13	21	28	23	15	100
		% within Position	13,0%	21,0%	28,0%	23,0%	15,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 11	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	13,0%	21,0%	28,0%	23,0%	15,0%	100,0%

In statements 11, 14 and 17, general education teachers mainly chose the answer neither agree nor disagree with percentages of 32% (Table 2), 36% (Table 3) and 46% (Table 4) respectively. Most special education teachers chose the answer to disagree (24%), or the answer neither agree nor disagree (24%) in statement 11 (Table 2), and the answer I completely agree (42%) in statement 14 (Table 3) and the answer disagrees in statement 17 (Table 4).

Table 3. Crosstab position and statement 14

Crosstab								
Statement 14								
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	7	7	18	15	3	50
		% within Position	14,0%	14,0%	36,0%	30,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 14	25,0%	33,3%	69,2%	78,9%	50,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	7,0%	7,0%	18,0%	15,0%	3,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	21	14	8	4	3	50
		% within Position	42,0%	28,0%	16,0%	8,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 14	75,0%	66,7%	30,8%	21,1%	50,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	21,0%	14,0%	8,0%	4,0%	3,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	28	21	26	19	6	100
		% within Position	28,0%	21,0%	26,0%	19,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 14	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	28,0%	21,0%	26,0%	19,0%	6,0%	100,0%

Table 4. Crosstab position and statement 17

Crosstab								
Statement 17								
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	7	7	18	15	3	50
		% within Position	14,0%	14,0%	36,0%	30,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 17	25,0%	33,3%	69,2%	78,9%	50,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	7,0%	7,0%	18,0%	15,0%	3,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	21	14	8	4	3	50
		% within Position	42,0%	28,0%	16,0%	8,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 17	75,0%	66,7%	30,8%	21,1%	50,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	21,0%	14,0%	8,0%	4,0%	3,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	28	21	26	19	6	100
		% within Position	28,0%	21,0%	26,0%	19,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 17	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	28,0%	21,0%	26,0%	19,0%	6,0%	100,0%

Concerning statement 12, both 38% of general education teachers and 38% of special education teachers agreed (Table 5). The majority of general education teachers also agreed with statements 13 (36%, Table 6) and 16 (42%, Table 7).

Table 5. Crosstab position and statement 12

Crosstab							
Statement 12							
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	8	19	16	7	50	8
		% within Position	16,0%	38,0%	32,0%	14,0%	100,0%	16,0%
		% within Statement 12	32,0%	50,0%	59,3%	70,0%	50,0%	32,0%
		% of Total	8,0%	19,0%	16,0%	7,0%	50,0%	8,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	17	19	11	3	50	17
		% within Position	34,0%	38,0%	22,0%	6,0%	100,0%	34,0%
		% within Statement 12	68,0%	50,0%	40,7%	30,0%	50,0%	68,0%
		% of Total	17,0%	19,0%	11,0%	3,0%	50,0%	17,0%
Total		Count	25	38	27	10	100	25
		% within Position	25,0%	38,0%	27,0%	10,0%	100,0%	25,0%
		% within Statement 12	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	25,0%	38,0%	27,0%	10,0%	100,0%	25,0%

Table 6. Crosstab position and statement 13

Crosstab							
Statement 13							
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	2	9	15	18	6	50
		% within Position	4,0%	18,0%	30,0%	36,0%	12,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 13	16,7%	37,5%	48,4%	78,3%	60,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	2,0%	9,0%	15,0%	18,0%	6,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	10	15	16	5	4	50
		% within Position	20,0%	30,0%	32,0%	10,0%	8,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 13	83,3%	62,5%	51,6%	21,7%	40,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	10,0%	15,0%	16,0%	5,0%	4,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	12	24	31	23	10	100
		% within Position	12,0%	24,0%	31,0%	23,0%	10,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 13	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	12,0%	24,0%	31,0%	23,0%	10,0%	100,0%

On the other hand, the majority of special education teachers chose the answer neither agree nor disagree (32%) in statement 13 (Table 6) and the answer I completely agree (40%) in statement 16 (Table 7).

Table 7. Crosstab position and statement 16

Crosstab								
Statement 16								
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	12	21	13	1	3	50
		% within Position	24,0%	42,0%	26,0%	2,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 16	37,5%	60,0%	54,2%	16,7%	100,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	12,0%	21,0%	13,0%	1,0%	3,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	20	14	11	5	0	50
		% within Position	40,0%	28,0%	22,0%	10,0%	0,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 16	62,5%	40,0%	45,8%	83,3%	0,0%	50,0%
		% of Total	20,0%	14,0%	11,0%	5,0%	0,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	32	35	24	6	3	100
		% within Position	32,0%	35,0%	24,0%	6,0%	3,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 16	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	32,0%	35,0%	24,0%	6,0%	3,0%	100,0%

Finally, in statement 15, 50% of general education teachers and 42% of special education teachers completely disagreed (Table 8).

Table 8. Crosstab position and statement 15

Crosstab								
Statement 15								
			1	2	3	4	5	Total
Position	General Educ.	Count	25	13	6	4	2	50
		% within Position	50,0%	26,0%	12,0%	8,0%	4,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 15	54,3%	54,2%	35,3%	57,1%	33,3%	50,0%
		% of Total	25,0%	13,0%	6,0%	4,0%	2,0%	50,0%
	Special Educ.	Count	21	11	11	3	4	50
		% within Position	42,0%	22,0%	22,0%	6,0%	8,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 15	45,7%	45,8%	64,7%	42,9%	66,7%	50,0%
		% of Total	21,0%	11,0%	11,0%	3,0%	4,0%	50,0%
Total		Count	46	24	17	7	6	100
		% within Position	46,0%	24,0%	17,0%	7,0%	6,0%	100,0%
		% within Statement 15	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
		% of Total	46,0%	24,0%	17,0%	7,0%	6,0%	100,0%

With the existence of relationships between teachers' position and their perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism in general school, position and statements 13 (p=0.006, Table 9), 14 (p=0.01, Table 10) and 17 (p=0.035, Table 11) are correlated, since the statistical significance p level was less than 0.05. However, no relationships were found between position and statements 10, 11, 12, 15 and 16.

Table 9. Existence of relationships between position and statement 13

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14,613[a]	4	,006
Likelihood Ratio	15,573	4	,004
Linear-by-Linear Association	11,175	1	,001
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 0 cells (,0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5,00.

Table 10. Existence of relationships between position and statement 14

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	19,548[a]	4	,001
Likelihood Ratio	20,434	4	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	13,529	1	,000
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 2 cells (20,0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3,00.

Table 11. Existence of relationships between position and statement 17

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10,355[a]	4	,035
Likelihood Ratio	10,834	4	,028
Linear-by-Linear Association	2,270	1	,132
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 4 cells (40,0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3,50.

As regards the magnitude of relationships between the teachers' position and their perceptions about the inclusion of students with autism, there is a statistically significant relationship between the variable's position and statement 12 (p=0.018, negative and low to moderate relationship, Table 12), 13 (p=0.000, negative and moderate relationship, Table 13) and 14 (p=0.000, negative and moderate relationship, Table 14), as the statistical significance p level was less than 0.05. In contrast, there is no statistically significant relationship between the variable's position and statements 10, 11, 15, 16 and 17.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the effect of teachers' positions on their perceptions and knowledge concerning the inclusion of students with autism in general schools.

Regarding the effect of teachers' position on their perceptions about this issue, the research results showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between position and 3 out of the 8 relevant statements (13, 14, 17). This is confirmed by Finch et al. (2013), Haimour & Obaidat (2013), Karal & Riccomini (2016), Kuyini & Mangope (2011), Lampadari & Garavelas (2018) and Mezquita-Hoyos et al. (2018). Position and statements 10, 11, 12, 15 and 16, however, did not reveal any statistically significant relationship between them, contradicting the above research.

According to various researches (Haimour & Obaidat, 2013; Majoko 2018b; Odongo & Davidson, 2016; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018; Yaraya et al., 2018), the lack of training and experience either in special educational needs generally, or in autism particularly, leads to teachers' negative perceptions and lack of knowledge on the topic. Teachers' perceptions have a decisive influence on both their commitment to inclusive practices and their way of teaching (Odongo & Davidson, 2016). Teachers without relevant preparation often consider that they do not have the appropriate skills to teach these children and, consequently, experience feelings of denial, fear, uncertainty and work stress (Majoko, 2018b). It is, therefore, necessary to provide them with training and experience in matters of

inclusive education. This can be achieved both during their studies, through attending relevant courses and internships in inclusive structures and during their career, through lifelong learning, the organization of free seminars and the provision of effective guidance and support.

The results of this study raised some new research questions: What other factors influence primary school teachers' perceptions and knowledge about the inclusion of students with autism in general school? How does primary school teachers' knowledge about autism relate to their perceptions about the inclusion of these children in general school? What are teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy when it comes to teaching students with autism in the general classroom? Conducting similar research would be particularly helpful in gathering further information on teachers' perceptions and knowledge about inclusive education, as well as the factors that affect them. Additionally, the same research could be repeated either with a larger sample or with the use of different populations (e.g. teachers of other educational levels, students, and parents).

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