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A literature Review on the Inclusion of Children with ASD and Special Educational Needs (SENDS) in the Greek Mainstream education system and teachers' perceptions and attitudes

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Abstract

This paper comprises an attempt to create a scientific basis on the inclusion processes for children with functional autism (ASD) and Special Educational Needs (SENDS) in the formal Greek education system of the 21st century as well as teachers' perceptions and attitudes. At the same time, for a better understanding of Greek educational policies, the legal background for SENDS and inclusion was sought. The role of gender, teacher's experience, the severity of the disability as well as the early intervention were highlighted as a determining factor for the successful inclusion and development of the child with SENDS.

1. Search Description

Initially, a series of databases, such as “ERIC”, “PubMed”, “Science Based Medicine” and “Taylor & Francis Online”, were searched for the following keywords in English: “Teachers”, “Students with Autism”, “Autism Spectrum”, “Inclusion”, “parents attitudes” “Perceptions”, “Knowledge”, “Primary teachers”, “Secondary teachers”, “Special Education”, “Preschool teachers”, “Greek school System” and “Special education teachers”. In a second phase it was conducted a new research with all the above-mentioned words in Greek, in Italian and in English too, in Google Scholar and in Taylor & Francis Online.

In addition, Greek and international pedagogical journals were investigated, such as Autism Research and Treatment, Autism Research, Autism, Autonomy, the Critical Journal of

Interdisciplinary Autism Studies, “Διάλογοι”, Developmental Disabilities “Εκπαιδευτική Επικαιρότητα”, “Θεωρία και Πράξη στις Επιστήμες της Αγωγής και Εκπαίδευσης”, “MEDLINE”, “PsycARTICLES”, “PsychINFO”, “SocINDEX”, “Παιδαγωγική Επιθεώρηση”, Research Reviews, and other.

The review period was from July to November 2018. The research retrieved about 30 articles and thesis and afterwards, based on the relevance with the subject of this research, the researcher analyzed 17 of them and studied their questions, methods, their main findings, the methodological lacks and the limitations of each study.

For the most part, these surveys are quantitative by random sampling. The other researches were excluded because they were not relevant to the subject of this research. In terms of reliability and validity, the researches selected for the purpose of this study seem to meet the questions and the worries on credibility and reliability, as the authors of the researches have taken all the necessary scientific and ethical conditions.

2. Literature Review on the Inclusion of Children with ASD and SENDs in the Greek Mainstream School Formal education system

A new approach on the education of people with disabilities has been widely accepted in recent years. Efforts have focused on the smooth inclusion of children with disabilities in formal education (Heward, 2011; Konstantinoy & Kosmidoy, 2011) instead of the traditional view of incorporation/integration. Such policies tended to target to an assimilation attempt, which, of course, led to parents' and teachers' frustration for unsuccessful attempts and on the other hand grew children's feeling of helplessness (Panteliadoy, 2011; Polychroni, 2012, Fodelianakis, 2020a, 2020b; Traficante, Adolfi & Wolf, 2017). The new approach focused on the respect of the abilities and the acceptance of the disability (what the child can do better), and on the other hand sought the involvement of more social structures, the extroversion of the school policies to the society and of course the reduction of the teaching anxiety with a differentiated instruction (Snowling & Hulme, 2012; Tomlinson et. al., 2003). In fact, it is now well known that the “integration process” decreases the pressure of the family too and on the other hand helps the ASD children as it gives more opportunities to interact with their classmates, to have more friends, and to have a greater improvement in gaming skills than children trained in special contexts (Handleman, Harris & Martins, 2005; Harrower & Dunlap, 2001).

2.1. Greek Laws on ASD and SENDs

Greek laws on ASD and SENDs. As far as children with ASD in Greece are concerned, it was only at the beginning of the 21st century that the state took serious measures and recognized legally the ASD. In fact, the Greek government stipulated the law 2018 on the Special Education and Training for Persons with Disabilities or with Special Educational Needs (SEaTPwD&SENDs, 2000), which of course led on the actual inclusion of children with ASD into formal education. Until then, Greece legally did not recognize the existence of children with autism, although private health care providers gave diagnoses with ASD but without any access to the public school and health care system services. The truth is that the previous laws of the '80's on the special needs and the education of children with special needs were very little helpful, as it led to the expansion of the idea of educating children with special needs in a special context (Zoniou-Sideri, Deropoulou-Derou, Karagianni & Spandagou, 2006).

At last, and literally the last EU country, Hellenic Republic, with the law 2817 of 2000, did the first step of inclusion for children with ASD, as it recognized the needs of special educational and special training, which, in the context of primary, secondary and technical vocational education, seeking in particular:

- (i) developing their personality,
- (ii) improving their skills and competences in order to integrate or reintegrate into the common education system and cohabitation with the community,
- (iii) vocational training and participation in the production process
- (iv) their reciprocal acceptance with the community and their equal social development.

The Greek ministry of education, in order to achieve the above objectives, organized specific teaching programs and methods. The truth is that although Greece is the last country of the EU that took act on the matter, had very fast steps. In fact, as in the context of public education is concerned, the school system emphasized on the recruitment of master graduate teachers on special education, which created an unprecedented interest in studies in this field. In fact, only 8 years after the last law of the year 2000, a new law passed on the Special Education and Training for Persons with Disabilities or with Special Educational Needs with the immediate aim of initiating the rapid development of educational processes for the inclusion of children with disabilities. (SEaTPwD&SENDs, 2008: 3699, Art. 199). These two laws, coupled with the enormous interest of teachers in further training and improving their skills, have been a real springboard for the further expansion of know-how and actual inclusion.

2.2. Inclusive education – Special Education

Inclusive Education – Special Education. In the recent few years, the tendency in the Greek educational reality highlights the need of the «inclusive education», or at least of an educational process that puts on the spot as little as possible a child with special educational needs. This kind of tactics, among other things it facilitates social contact and interaction and lapses the social deficit of ASD (Handleman et al., 2005; Gena, 2002). If a full «inclusive education» is not a realistic choice, it is suggested a discreet parallel support, wishing to combine the benefits of the children interaction in the classroom and the educational support (Special Education and Training for Persons with Disabilities or with Special Educational Needs, 3699/2008, Art. 199).

The big gain from the process of including children with functional autism into formal education, seems to be the creation of positive attitudes of the formally developing children towards their classmates as well as teachers and other parents. Nevertheless, many researchers tend to recognize a small contribution of full inclusion to the children with ASD if it is not taken under consideration the personal differentiated needs of the child (Tomlinson et al., 2003; Paraskevopoulos, 2008). In fact, some researchers use to exalt the personal and the “one to one” education for each child in need, and especially for ASD children, although it’s well known that the socialization of the child is called into question and the opportunities of social interface are abandoned (Gena, 2002).

Although many decisions and laws have already been taken to protect children with disabilities and in particular with autism in Greece, it is often pointed out by the researchers that much remains to be done, as there has been no generalization of educational inclusion (Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Soulis, 2002; Zoniou-Sideri, Deropoulou-Derou, Karagianni & Spandagou, 2006).

However, international practices are turning to educational inclusion and avoidance of social isolation. In Great Britain, both in England and Scotland, the implementation of such policies, initially created very high expectations, but very soon the serious consequences of the inclusion of children with disabilities in the formal education system were identified, mainly in terms of labeling and stigmatization (Hodkinson, 2010; Heaward, 2011). Hodkinson (2010) in his research on the GB reality, and especially about the doubts on the success of the inclusion in England, highlighted the need to explore the wishes of the family context for the integration process, while in Scotland the benefits of social and educational integration seem to have contributed to impose and maintaining the specific educational policy and to (Francis, 2008). In USA and Canada there is a general perception that the process of inclusive education can be completely successful (Taylor & Sobel, 2001; Strong, 2018) if there is a good training of the teachers (McCrimmon, 2015). Strong (2018), in his qualitative study of 15 cases of participants and 14 case studies of parents with children with disabilities in USA,

concludes that parents and teachers, even if they encountered great difficulties, exalted the inclusion process by highlighting the benefits in the socialization of children.

2.3. Teachers' perceptions and attitudes

As far as teachers' perceptions are concerned, in the past decade, several investigations have been made regarding their beliefs and their attitudes on the inclusive process. Most of them referred to the general process of including children with SENDs in the Greek mainstream educational system and there is very little on the attitudes of teachers on the inclusion of ASD children.

Surveys of the 1980s and 1990s (Hudson, Graham & Warner's, 1979; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Saumell, 1996) showed a steady negative attitude of teachers towards inclusion or at least showed a covered denial with the pretext of a better education in special schools (Knoff, 1985). Padeliadu (1995) attributed teachers' negative attitude in their sensation that they weren't adequately prepared.

Never the less, two Greek surveys of the same period, both in 1997, (Padeliadu & Lampropoulou, 1997; Lampropoulou & Padeliadu, 1997) reflect a different situation. In fact, both researches interviewed and compared the attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs to the mainstream school. The first one (Padeliadu & Lampropoulou, 1997) compared specialist and regular teachers, and the second one (Lampropoulou & Padeliadu, 1997) explored the differences between regular teachers and specialist teachers with teachers for deaf children. The findings of both studies pointed out a different attitude, as the regular teachers opted to include children in the mainstream education in contrast to specialist teachers who insisted on a special education system (Padeliadu & Lampropoulou, 1997; Lampropoulou & Padeliadu, 1997).

Studies that are more recent confirmed that the negative teachers' tendencies changed, but of course not dramatically and not universally, but if we take into account the previous two studies of Padeliadu and Lampropoulou (1997) and Lampropoulou and Padeliadu (1997), we could just assume that the tendency for inclusion was simply generalized in Greece and elsewhere. In fact, researches such as Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden's (2000), Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) and Kuyini and Desai's (2006) showed that the attitudes of regular teachers' changed a lot, and in some cases it reached 82% of positive opinions on inclusion (Heiman, 2001). As a matter of fact, in another survey in Greece, in 2008 the researchers underline the remarkable positive position of regular teachers on the inclusion and that "despite their obvious lack of confidence and special education expertise, the

majority of the teachers, motivated by humanistic ideals, tended to be positive to all students with any SEN” (Koutrouba, Vamvakari and Theodoropoulos, 2008, p. 419).

Teachers’ gender, experience and the severity of the SENDs. Other international studies identify the teachers’ gender and their experience as the main factors that could have a widespread effect on the success of inclusive education. For example, Alghazo and Naggar Gaad (2004) in their research highlighted the important role played by gender and the educational experience in achieving inclusion; they actually point out that male teachers, but especially those who did not have specific educational experience and expertise, tended to have negative beliefs about inclusion. In the same spirit, the survey of Opdal, Wormnaes, and Habaye (2001) led to almost identical conclusions.

On the other hand, Botonaki (2016) in her research presented some interesting findings. First of all, she doesn’t accept that there is any gender difference between male and female teaching or supportive attitudes, but she is also exalting the role of teachers’ experience for the success in the inclusion of children with SEN and ASD to the mainstream educational system (Botonaki, 2016).

Another factor that is often pointed out by the researchers is the severity of the SEN. In fact, Koutrouba, Vamvakari and Steliou (2006), in their research in Cyprus (a state that presents almost identical statistics with Greece because of the common ethnological origin and language, the almost identical education system and the frequent student exchange in the two states), they highlight that the severity of the SEN is the main factor in shaping teachers’ positive or negative position on the inclusion of children with SEN. Indeed, Koutrouba et al. (2006) pointed out that the gravity of the disability is inversely proportional to the formation of teachers’ positive positions.

Early inclusion of children with ASD. Another interesting finding is that the research is pointing more on the perception and the attitudes of the teachers at the beginning of the children’s academic career, that is on the kindergarten or at the early elementary grades (McKeating, 2013), or at the first elementary grade (Botonaki, 2016). As it is pointed out, a real functional ASD child is not always diagnosed at early age, which is creating an extra problem for the school system to face (Botonaki, 2016).

Kalyva in a 2010 survey, searched the skills and the knowledge of primary school teachers regarding learning difficulties and autism. The survey found that most of the teachers failed on basic knowledge about autism, although their knowledge on learning difficulties was better, which we suppose that affected their attitudes towards children with ASD. This hypothesis seems to be demonstrated by a Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, and Polychronopoulou’s (2012) research on the subject. In fact, they demonstrated that the training and the experience created good prognosis and attitudes.

Fodelianakis (2018) in his research on the relationship between phonological awareness and reading comprehension, highlights the role of this ability in the attitudes of all factors of the education system towards children with learning disabilities and neurodevelopmental disorders. He emphasizes that early phonological intervention, with micro-teachings of morphological and phonological knowledge, contributes to (i) the improvement of language (spoken and written), (ii) to the attitudes of the teachers of the next classes, (iii) improves the self-image and the integration of children but also (iv) contributes to parents' attitude towards this dynamic class (Fodelianakis, 2018).

ASD and teachers' perception. The research on the Greek teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the inclusion of children with ASD, started only the last decade. These researches are in line with other older ones such as the researches of Padeliadu and Lampropoulou (1997), Lampropoulou, Padeliadu (1997) and others even older than that on the children's inclusion with general disabilities and general SEN. In fact, a mainstreaming research of Lambadari and Garavelas (2018) studied the attitudes of 102 regular teachers and specialist of the Greek Secondary Education system and they found out that both regular teachers and specialist had a positive opinion on the inclusion process (the specialists were slightly more positive), although the regular teacher felt that they were not adequately specialized and informed. Another interesting point of this study (as it came out to the previously mentioned surveys on the SENDs cases too) was that teachers' sense was that previous teaching experience and special educational training was the main factor of forming these opinions. Cassimos, Polychronopoulou, Tripsianis and Syriopoulou-Delli (2013) in their newer survey on the inclusion, as the older one which is cited before (Syriopoulou-Delli, et al., 2012), are in full concordance with the educational experience and training as a condition for the fulfilment of the purposes of special education. However, this recent study highlights the inhibitions of teachers in the effectiveness of educational inclusion in children with autism and it is underlined that "teachers do not appear to be confident and fully capable in managing ASD students in the classroom" (Cassimos et al., 2013, p. 8).

3. Discussion – Conclusions - Limitations

The last few years, researchers pointed out, in an even more prominent way, that inclusion is the most beneficial process both for TDC and SENDs (Gena, 2002; Paraskevopoulos, 2008; Agaliotis & Kalyva, 2011; Soulis, 2002; Zoniou-Sideri, Deropoulou-Derou, Karagianni & Spandagou, 2006). That is the cause that governments and organizations on the education rights, they are trying to impose another prospective and practices on the education of children with SENDs, as it is beneficial for both SENDs and TDC on socialization and on academic and functional program.

It is well known that teachers' beliefs and perceptions is a main key factor in the whole effort. In fact, the researches was rather controversial, showing on the one hand negative attitudes –mostly the old ones- (Hudson et al., 1979; Vaughn, et al., 1996; Knoff, 1985; Padelia, 1995) and on the other hand, more recent researches on the issue in Greece, showed a rather positive attitude but in a strict relation to specific factors, such the experience, the gender and the severity of the SENDs (Botonaki, 2016; Koutrouba et al., 2006). Another factor that determined the positive teachers' attitude was the inclusion of children with general SENDs in the early school years (McKeating, 2013; Botonaki, 2016; Syriopoulou-Delli, et.al. 2012; Fodelianakis, 2018; Milathianaki, 2020).

As far as teachers' perceptions and attitudes are concerned, it is pointed out that teachers' preparation/training and the support of the educational system has a great impact to the educational and to the inclusion process. Other factors that are highlighted is the role of teachers' gender and the early inclusion.

A limitation of the studies conducted until now is that they do not give a clear view on the perspective of teachers to identify children in need, such a functional ASD child, without prior diagnosis, and ask for a neurodevelopmental evaluation. In addition, it would be interesting to know the social limitations of the teacher to make a first assessment and if he feels that his relationship with the parents makes the referral and diagnostic process difficult. It would be equally important to investigate teachers' views on whether they feel more ready for the inclusion of children in the general class as it is now a generalized practice and whether they consider that the practice of integration contributes to the improvement of children with ASD to the extent of their integration into secondary education. The lack of such researches on the teachers' attitudes and perceptions about the inclusion process of children with mild ASD, such as Asperger's Disorder, makes this research more necessary and useful for both teachers but also for the children themselves.

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