

Original Research Article

## Preschool Pedagogy and Factors Affecting Inclusive Education: Views of Greek Kindergarten Teachers

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**Abstract:** It is now an indisputable fact that Kindergarten holds a central role among all levels of education and the social skills acquired by the person during the preschool period are important as they determine the type of relationships with their peers, but also their overall development until they reach adulthood. However, the request remains for the kindergarten to be transformed into a place that will ensure the equal participation of all children in the educational process and the acceptance of their diversity. In the context of this research, which was carried out during the school year 2023-2024, the opinions of kindergarten teachers (N: 240) of the Regional Unit of Epirus were investigated, regarding the factors that affect the co-education of all students in the general school. Inclusive education includes a set of strategies, practices, perspectives and options that allow children with typical and non-typical development to be included in the general kindergarten classroom. The research data showed the need for the general school to be properly organized and for the teachers to work in the context of a dynamic collaboration among themselves, in order to determine the strategies, practices, appropriate conditions and teaching content.

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Early Childhood Education, Kindergarten Teachers, Co-education Factors.

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### INTRODUCTION

Kindergarten is an important period in children's lives and an important first place for socialization and education. At the same time, the infants are removed from the safety of the family and experience unprecedented classifications for them. Undoubtedly, it plays an important role in preparing young children for school life, since it equips them to be able to respond flexibly to a wide range of skills and to determine the type of relationships with their peers. For children with special educational needs, kindergarten is even more important for their inclusion, integration and substantial co-education in general classes, as well as for the acquisition of cognitive and social skills (Penderi, & Papanastastou, 2022 • Zhu *et al.*, 2021). Our research study considers that diversity and inclusion in the modern classroom is important, as students from different backgrounds bring a variety of learning experiences, values, knowledge, abilities and skills to any learning process. As the idea of "inclusive education" has gained momentum, students who were previously placed in special education programs because they were considered "less able" are now considered to

belong in mainstream classes (Mahlangu, & Mtshali, 2024).

In many countries the effort to achieve an inclusive system has resulted in the education of students with special educational needs in mainstream school and a reduction in the number of students attending special schools. All teachers of the school should be involved in the development of its special conditions (educational policy formulation for inclusion) and be fully aware of the classroom procedures for identifying, assessing and predicting for all students. The inclusion in an ordinary school of all students who will follow the same curriculum, at the same time, in the same classrooms with the full acceptance of all and that the student will not somehow feel different from other students is considered inclusion in the general classroom (Tarantino *et al.*, 2022). Co-education is based on the right of every child to be a member of common school life and to be provided with appropriate teaching and learning experiences (Charitaki *et al.*, 2024 • Schembri, 2021).

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The goal of educational systems around the world is participatory or inclusive education characterized by diversity and which differentiates the educational practice. Cooperation and teamwork are key aspects of the practice of inclusive education (Sander, 2021). Teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies to support the effective inclusion of students with special educational needs such as scaffolding, modeling, contingency management. Differentiation is the key to successfully integrating the curriculum into the daily kindergarten schedule. The purpose of differentiation is to promote children's success in learning. Time for instructional planning, teacher training, material resources, school human resources and class size are essential for successful inclusion (Dominguez, & Svihla, 2023 • Kumar, 2023 • Sakellariou *et al.*, 2020 • Stingo, 2024).

Teamwork, the collaboration of two or more teachers with a group of students in a single physical space, promotes inclusion in mainstream schools. Children accept individual differences when they are all taught together in the same classroom. All students can gain equal access to the syllabus through the appropriate teaching team. Teachers will benefit from group teaching even if it involves more preparation. Their daily stress will be reduced if they have access to appropriate educational programs, resources and additional supports (De Jong *et al.*, 2022).

Preschool and school age is a pivotal period for the development of social and emotional skills so it is very important that all students are taught in inclusive classrooms (Garon-Carrier *et al.*, 2024 • McClelland *et al.*, 2017). The developmental foundations of social - emotional competence are laid mainly during early childhood (Spencer *et al.*, 2017). Early experiences strongly influence the way young children begin to understand themselves and the world around them. For the all-round development of students during childhood, internal and external factors should be considered. Internal factors refer to characteristics of children such as temperament or personality. On the other hand, in order to contribute to their social and emotional development, it is vital to provide children with an environment, family, school, social and a cultural context, where they will feel safe and confident

(Djamnezhad, Dariush, *et al.*, 2021 • McClelland *et al.*, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research objective

This study examines the factors of inclusive education and aims at the inclusive learning of all students who have the right to provide them with the necessary support, appropriate media and modern curricula for teaching in mainstream classes.

### Research Tool

The questionnaire allowed the teachers to answer in an impersonal and anonymous way. It was created specifically for the needs of this research. The questions corresponded to the Likert scale, according to which the participants indicated the degree of agreement or importance with a statement using a scale from 1 to 5. While completing the questionnaire, if the teachers asked any questions, the researcher provided the necessary clarifications, but avoiding expressing a personal opinion and position. After completing the questionnaire, they were asked if they wanted the results of the survey to be shared with them and the researcher thanked them for their contribution to the research.

The questionnaires were collected, the answers given were coded, processed and analyzed with the help of the statistical package SPSS v 23.0. For the analysis of the research data, the methodological course followed requires the researcher to prepare, analyze, interpret and evaluate the tables, diagrams and answers.

### Research limitations

Before starting the research, it was decided that the teachers who would fill out the questionnaires would be from the Regional Unit of Epirus and would work in public kindergartens. We consider that further investigation at a pan-Hellenic level would be worthwhile, in order to generalize our conclusions with greater certainty.

### Research Sample

This research analyzes the opinions of 240 kindergarten teachers of the Regional Unit of Epirus on the factors that influence co-education, during the 2023-2024 school year. Their years of teaching service ranged from one year to over thirty years (table 1).

**Table 1: Years of Teaching Service Most of the teachers who participated in our survey have been working in schools for between eleven and twenty years**

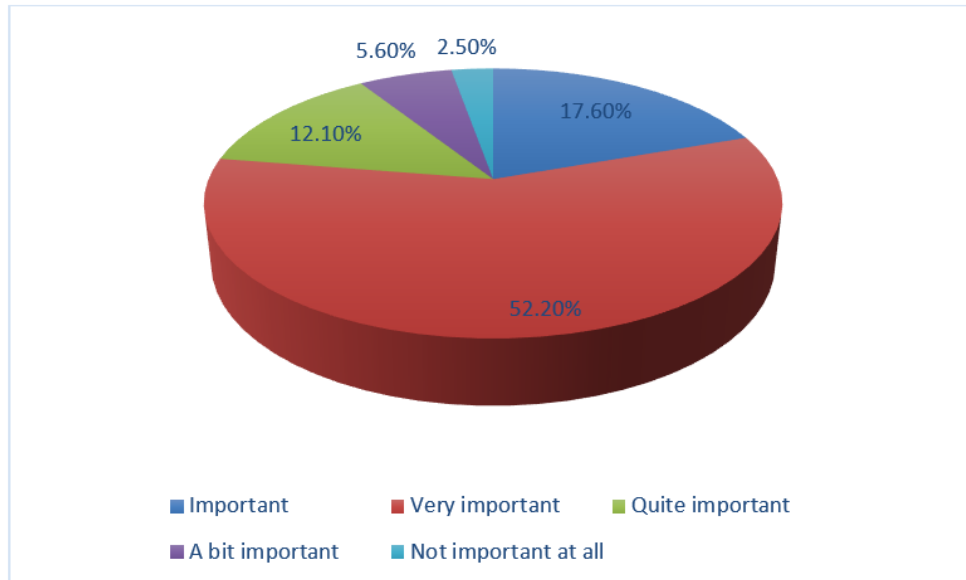
Years of teaching service	Kindergarten teachers
Up to five years	6.7%
Six to ten years	12.5%
Eleven to 20 years	64.2%
Twenty one to thirty years	15%
Over thirty years	1.7%

**PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS**  
*Factors of co-education of children with typical and non-typical development*

If students with both typical and non-typical development attend the program in a general classroom, the following factors should be considered. Please rate the factors according to the degree of importance or the

degree of ease or difficulty required, based on your own experience.

*To teach in inclusive classrooms, how important is it to have knowledge of early childhood and teaching practice?*

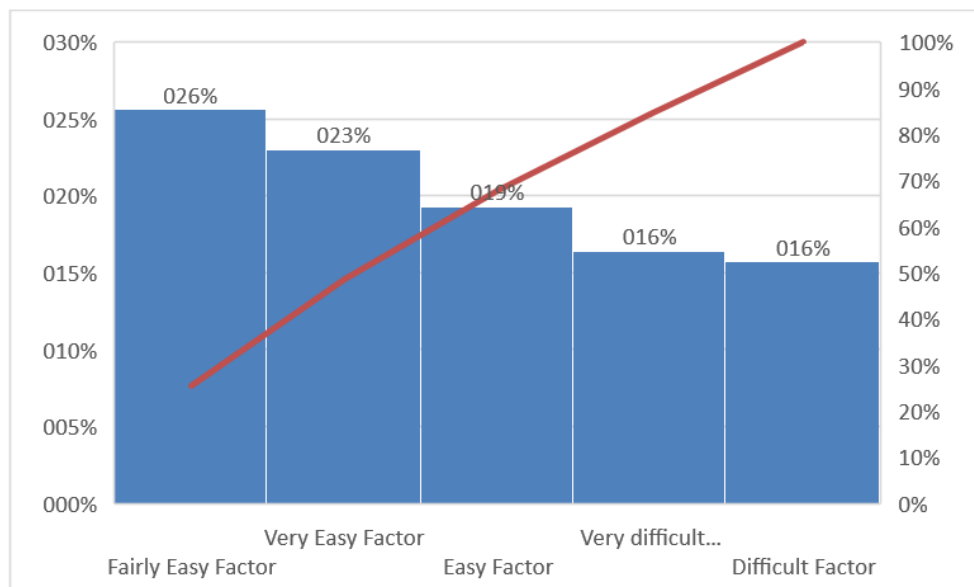


**Graph 1: Quantitative overall results for the category: Knowledge of Preschool Age and Teaching Practice**

From the analysis of the data we saw that it is Very important for 52.2% of kindergarten teachers to have knowledge of preschool age and teaching practice in order to teach in inclusive classes, Important for

17.6%, Quite important for 12.1%, A bits important for 5.6% and Not important at all for 2.5%.

*How easy or difficult is it to adopt a flexible teaching style?*

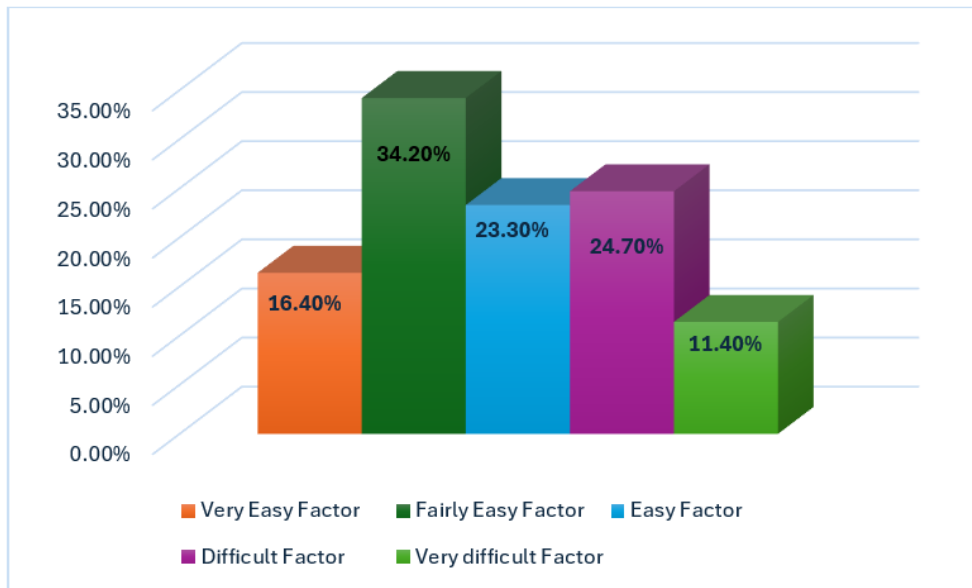


**Graph 2: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Adopting a Flexible Teaching Style**

For most kindergarteners it is Fairly Easy Factor 25.6% to adopt a flexible teaching style, Very Easy Factor for 23.0%, Easy Factor for 19.3%, Very

difficult Factor for 16.40%, Difficult Factor for 15.7%. From the analysis we find that opinions are divided.

*How easy or difficult is it to change the structure and operation of the classroom?*

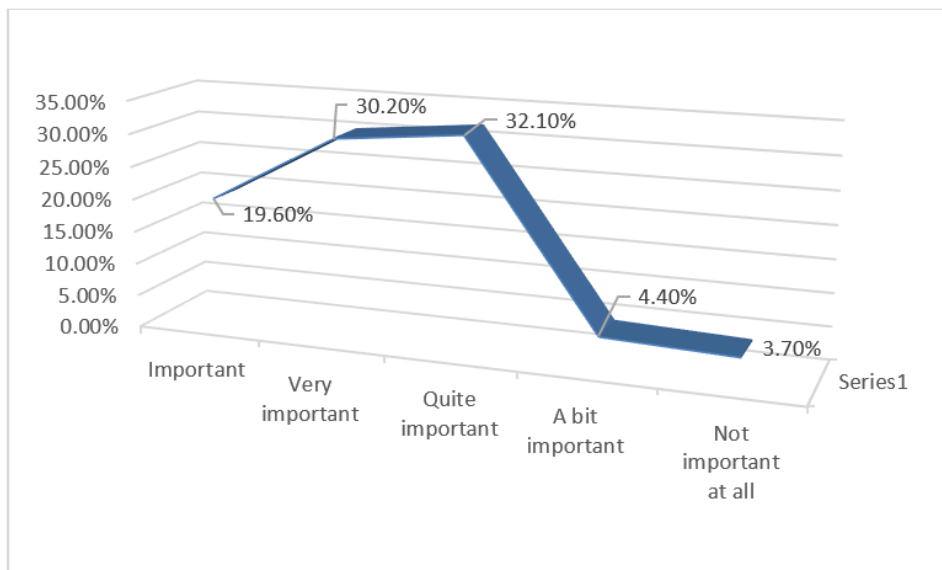


**Graph 3: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Changing the structure and operation of the class**

For most kindergarteners it is Fairly Easy Factor 34.2% the change of the structure and operation of the class, Very Easy Factor for 16.4%, Easy Factor for 23.3%, Very difficult Factor for 11.4%, Difficult Factor for 24.7%. From the analysis we find that a large

percentage considers this factor quite difficult and difficult.

*How important a factor of inclusion is the amendment of the Analytical Curriculums?*

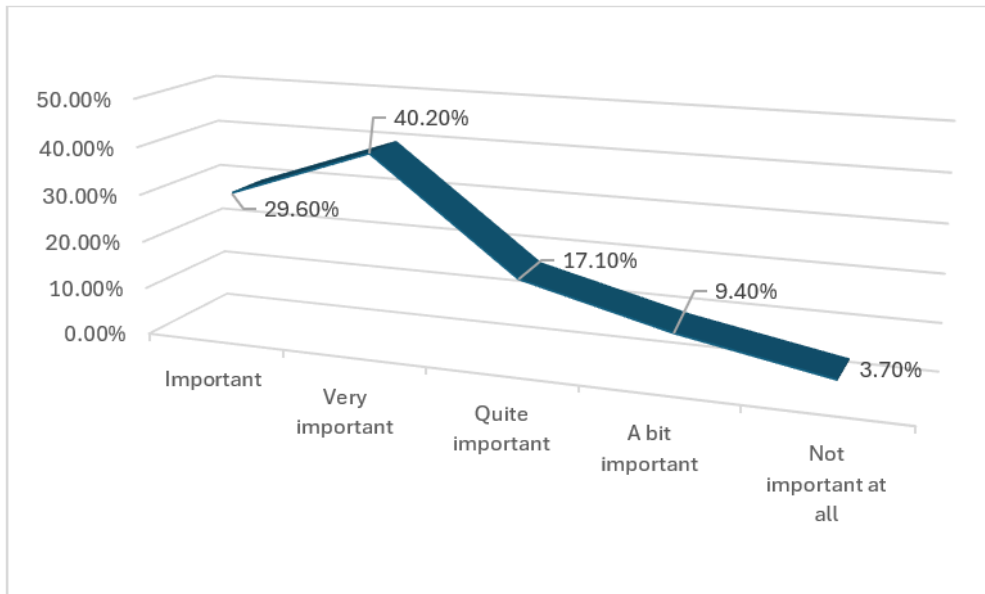


**Graph 4: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Modification of the Analytical Study Programs**

From the analysis of the data we saw that it is Quite important for 32.1% of kindergarten teachers is the modification of the Analytical Programs for the inclusion, Very important for 30.2% of kindergarten teachers, Important for 19.6%, A bits important for 4.4%

and Not important at all for 3.7%. For most kindergarten teachers this factor is quite important and very important.

*How important is the use of modern assessment methods for inclusion?*

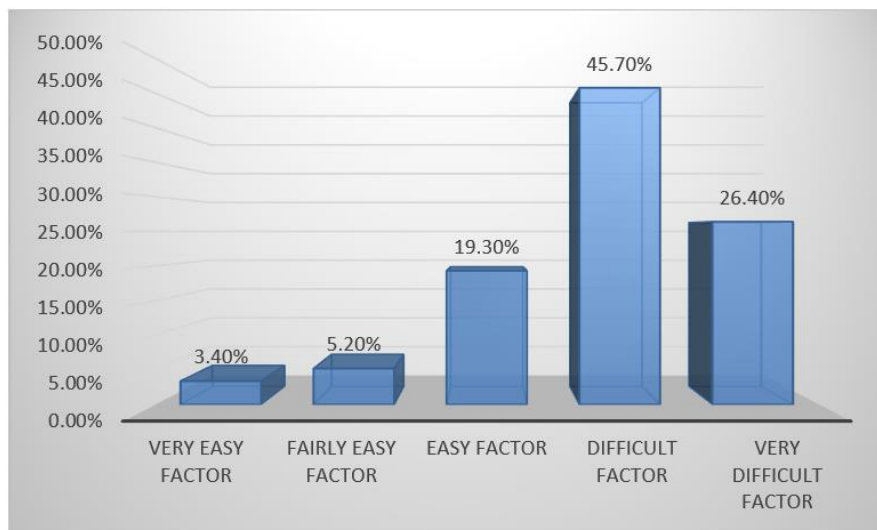


**Graph 5: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Modern Evaluation Methods**

The utilization of modern evaluation methods is Very important for 40.2% of kindergarten teachers, Important for 29.6%, Quite important for 17.1%, A bits

important for 9.4% and not important at all for 3.7%. For most kindergarten teachers this factor is very important.

*How easy or difficult is it to deal with behavior problems?*

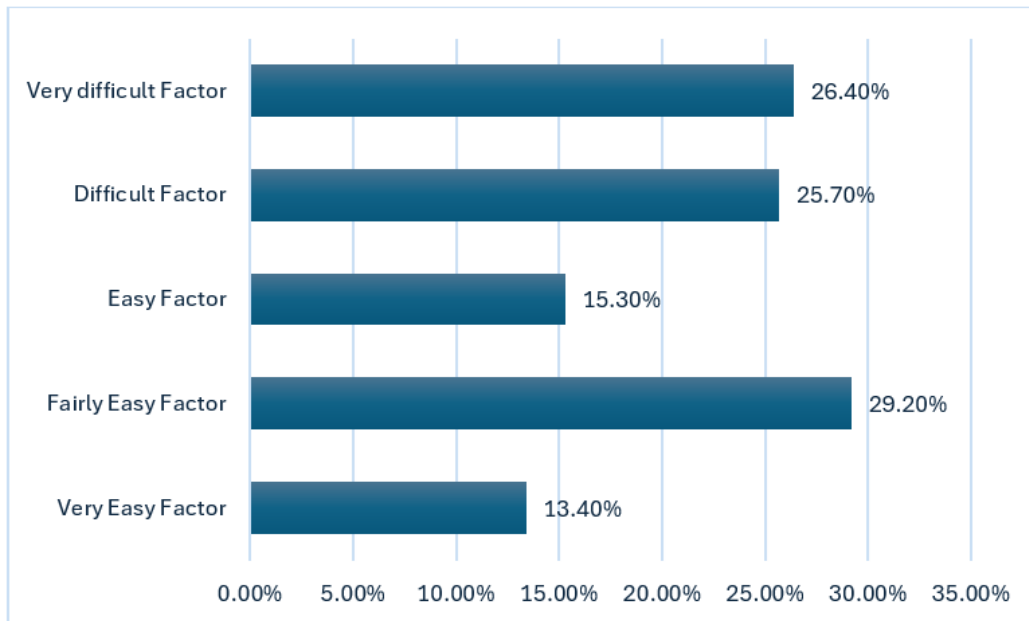


**Graph 6: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Addressing behavioral problems**

Dealing with behavior problems is difficult Factor (45.7%) and Very difficult Factor (26.4%), for 19.3%. Easy Factor, for the 5.2% Fairly Easy Factor and Very Easy Factor for the 3.4%. From the analysis we find

that a large percentage considers this factor difficult and very difficult.

*How easy or difficult is the cooperation of kindergarten teachers?*

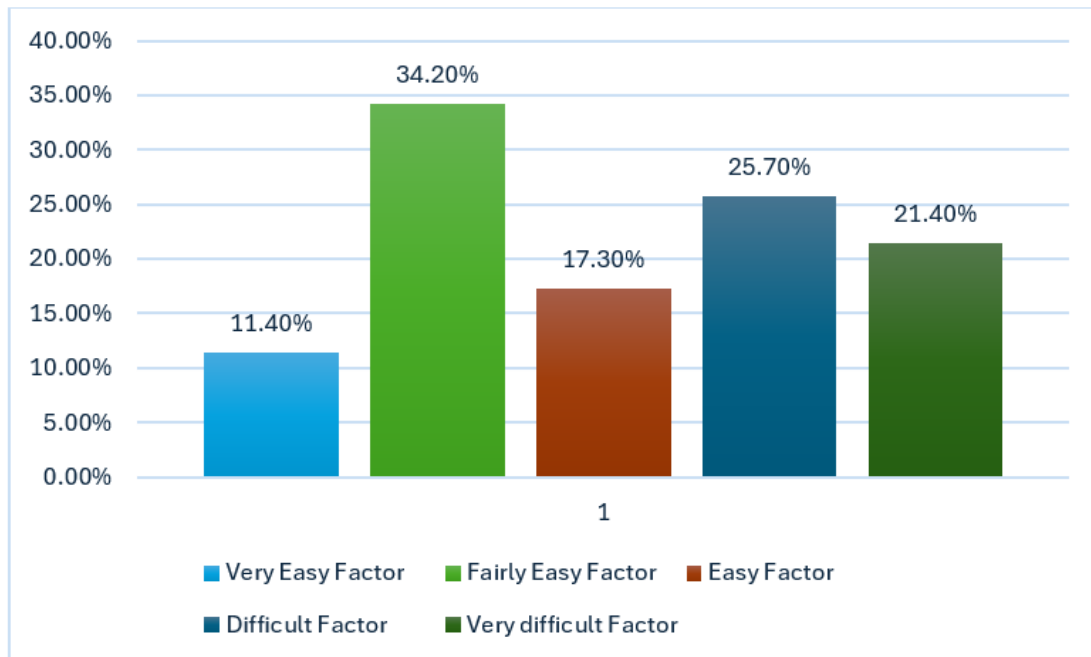


**Graph 7: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Cooperation of Kindergarten Teachers**

For most kindergarteners it is Fairly Easy Factor 29.2% the cooperation of the kindergarten teachers, Very Easy Factor for 13.4%, Easy Factor for 15.3%, Very difficult Factor for 26.4%, Difficult Factor for 25.7%. From the analysis of the data we find that

more than 50% of the research participants consider this factor difficult and very difficult.

*How easy or difficult is it to work with students' families?*



**Graph 8: Quantitative results on the whole for the category: Collaboration with Students' Families**

Kindergarteners consider it Fairly Easy Factor (34.2%) the cooperation with the students' families, Very Easy Factor for 11.4%, Easy Factor for 17.3%, Very difficult Factor for 21.4%, Difficult Factor for 25.7%.

From the analysis we find that a large percentage of the research participants consider this factor difficult and very difficult.



Which activities, in your opinion, will help to implement inclusive education. Rank in order of priority from 1-9 (where 1: most important to 9: least important).

**Table 2: Mean values and standard deviations in ranking options for activities that help with inclusion**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
A self-service	240	1.67	1,142	,078
Body awareness	240	3.92	1,854	,126
Artistic expression and role playing games	240	4.88	1,763	,120
Oral speech	240	7.07	1,714	,116
Logical-mathematical thinking	240	7.01	1,503	,102
Recognition and expression emotions	240	4.82	2,085	,142
Social development and Cooperation	240	2.81	1,456	,099
Acquaintance with the school environment	240	5.23	2,429	,165
Written Speech	240	7.59	1,579	,107

Analyzing the data regarding the activities that will help to implement inclusive education, it was found that self-service activities are the most important for kindergarten teachers (mean 1.67), then activities that help social development and lay the foundations for collaboration (mean 2.81), then the activities of body awareness and perception of body parts (mean 3.92), followed by the activities of recognizing and expressing emotions (mean 4.82), the activities related to artistic expression activities and role-playing (mean 4.88), the activities that help the children get familiar with the school environment (mean 5.23), less important the activities that promote logical-mathematical thinking (mean 7.01), the activities concerning the oral language (mean 7.07) and the written word (mean 7.59).

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

All children have the right to be taught together with their peers, while recognizing their commonalities and different needs. Inclusion is related to the child's right to participate in as many activities as possible at school and the school's duty to accept the child's right (Leijen *et al.*, 2021). In order to promote inclusive education as we see from our research, all those involved with the child and his learning should take into account factors related to what is taught in schools (formulation of curricula), how teaching, how human resources and materials will be utilized, and that their management should be decided through collective decision-making and planning (Parker *et al.*, 2022).

The success of inclusive education depends on the ability of teachers to respond to the diversity of the classroom. Many teachers are concerned about their ability to teach diverse groups of children, plan time, set expectations and implement ways of assessing students and adopt a flexible teaching style as shown by the responses we received in our research study. They also recognize that it is not always easy to teach children with very different abilities in the same classroom. Understanding teaching and learning by adopting a flexible teaching style and changing classroom

functioning is key to developing inclusive learning (Woodcock *et al.*, 2022).

The development of flexible programs that will be based on the differentiation of learning situations is a necessity for the modern school. Differentiated teaching and learning presupposes the existence of a flexible curriculum that is constantly modified to adapt to the needs of each student (Adebisi, 2024). The differentiation of learning experiences helps to achieve the attendance of all children in mainstream school and their inclusive education. A modern curriculum should include knowledge, skills, dispositions (curiosity, creativity) and feelings (confidence, security) (Sakellariou *et al.*, 2021).

From our research it became clear that kindergarten teachers consider it important to have knowledge about the learning and development of preschool students. Modern pedagogy wants the co-educational teacher to have strong knowledge, shared knowledge and shared beliefs to connect school and university, acquisition of study methods in assessment and teaching practice. In order for teachers to feel capable of contributing to an inclusive classroom they should have a continuous learning environment that begins in their years of study and continues throughout their professional lives (Aguilar, 2024 • Jernes *et al.*, 2020).

Teachers need to improve their teaching skills and acquire specialized knowledge to work effectively in inclusive classrooms. The programs that aim to support teachers in revising their role, regarding the co-education of children with typical and non-typical development, should be based not only on the provision of theoretical training for teachers, but also on the possibility of offering empirical knowledge through practice (Dignath, *et al.*, 2022). Every child has the right to access education and the promotion of their voice is recognized as an important element for the development of a solidary education system (Correia *et al.*, 2019 • Shier, 2016).

One of the main anxieties of teachers in co-educational classes is dealing with behavioral problems and this is proven by our research study causing them high levels of work stress. Students who exhibit behavior problems during their studies in kindergarten and do not have appropriate educational intervention, in their adult life have increased chances of developing personal and interpersonal problems. The success of the intervention depends on many factors related to the type of problem, the duration of the intervention program, the quality of the family-school relationships and all those involved in the educational process (Agyapong *et al.*, 2022). The need for teacher training in issues related to behavior problems in the classroom is the subject of many investigations. Educators of the 21<sup>st</sup> century acquire skills important for inclusion and design learning experiences enhancing collaboration and participation (Eslitt, 2023).

Family involvement in inclusive classrooms is positively correlated with good behavior, social skills and active student participation in the educational process. In addition, it is related to better mental health of students, their self-esteem and greater participation in school and in life in general. Active participation can strengthen the relationship between parents and teachers, positively changing the attitudes of parents towards school and the role of the teacher and teachers towards parents (Yang *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, parental involvement (at home and at school) is associated with higher parental self-confidence and self-efficacy, as well as greater satisfaction with school. The positive relationship between parental involvement and better communication between families and students is also reported (Paccaud *et al.*, 2021). Our research data converges on the above conclusions.

In conclusion, the idea of "inclusive education" has gained momentum. Students who were previously placed in special education programs because they were considered "less able" are now considered to belong in general education classes. In the present study, inclusive education is considered to be an education that encompasses various learning needs, multicultural inclusion, education for students with special educational needs or disabilities, and education for different age groups such as toddlers - pre-toddlers (Regmi, 2019). In order to meet the diverse needs of all students by promoting their participation in learning, cultural activities and wider communities, minimizing their exclusion from the education system, inclusion should be practiced (Mahlangu, & Mtshali, 2024).

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