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Research Article

The Role of Social Skills throughout Inclusive Education Implementation

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Abstract: Children with special educational needs or disabilities experience difficulties while interacting and they have to learn social skills such as communication, problem solving and behaviour management. School systems should respond to the diversity of learners and inclusive education can be completed via holistic approaches, based on recognition of diversity and special educational needs. In the present research a) there have been investigated the opinions of 520 educators (N: 217 Kindergarten teachers and N: 303 Primary School Teachers) of Epirus Region in terms of inclusion, inclusive education, transition, and social skills acquisition regarding children with special education needs or disabilities and b. there has been implemented an educational programme with 11 students with diffuse developmental disabilities. The given programme allowed us to study in depth the concept of inclusiveness and practices followed to social skills acquisition. Teachers' positive attitude is an important dimension while transitional steps should be taken to adopt a participatory education model for schools, society and education policy. In a class of high quality and enhanced inclusive practices, teachers provide opportunities to obtain social skills and accept the differences shown by all children.

Keywords: Inclusion, Skills, Kindergarten & Primary School Teachers, Special Education, Disability.

1. INTRODUCTION

A transition from the traditional special education systems to inclusion and inclusive education attracts the interest of many researchers (Armstrong *et al.*, 2010; Soulis, 2013). For children with special educational needs or disabilities, kindergarten school is important for effective inclusion in the general classes as well as for the acquisition of cognitive and social skills (Soulis, 2010; Kamerman & Gatenio, 2003).

Children with special educational needs or disabilities show difficulties while interacting and have to learn social skills such as communication, problem solving and behaviour management (Webster-Stratton et al, 2004). Teachers for the development of social skills can adopt a variety of approaches that respond to the interests of learners by encouraging targetted skills by interacting and enhancing a positive behavior (Wilcox *et al.*, 2011; Hebbeler & Spiker, 2016). Practices that enhance a flexible and functional interaction in common sets, with a group of classmates and adults, promote communication and cognitive development throughout children (Kaiser & Trent, 2007; Hebbeler & Spiker, 2016).

The joint studentship of both pupils with and without special educational needs in a common class presupposes the assurance of classroom consistency, the establishment of an relationship focused in interaction with each pupil separately and the adaptation of the curriculum to the pupils' educational needs (Stainback *et al.*, 1997; Nanou, 2013). In order to include the whole group of pupils, we adopted alternative methods and practices, setting in mind that all pupils with special educational needs remain in the margins of a traditional teaching, due to their inability to adapt.

Differentiating a teaching procedure is positively related to inclusive education and the removal of obstacles. It is a paedagogical strategy, aimed at adapting the paedagogical objectives of activities, materials and learning support according to the needs and pace of each pupil. It is a methodological alternative that allows individualized approach to each pupil's educational needs within a classroom (Weston, 1992; Kucelin, 2006; Nanou, 2009). The teacher, who applies a differentiated teaching, exploits a variety of strategies to meet each child's particular needs (Tomlinson, 2000; Waid, 2016).

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Children with autism spectrum disorders experience difficulties in social and communication skills such as:

- eye contact,
- social orientation,
- Attention,
- symbolic play,
- imitation,
- non-verbal communication and language learning (Charman *et al.*, 1997; Cox *et al.*, 1999; Lord, 1995; Stone Lee *et al.*, 1999).

Behaviours such as a rigid routine, some repetitive movements, worries, persistent behaviours and self-destructive tendencies are visible (Hyman & Towbin, 2007). In a learning context, all children in a general school face the challenge of acquiring social skills for a transition of a child with special educational needs or a disability from kindergarten to the primary school. Several studies have positively evaluated this important transition to foreseen some future success in social, emotional and cognitive development (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Peters, 2010; Sayers *et al.*, 2012).

One of the main stresses expressed by teachers in inclusive schools is treating behavioural problems which cause them high levels of work-related stress (Bilanaki & Tragoulia, 2011; Kyriakou & Sutcliffe, 1977, 1978, 1979; Kantas, 2001). Pupils who show behavioural problems, while attending a kindergarten or an elementary school and have not attended a specialized psycho-pedagogical intervention programme, have an increased chance of developing personal or interpersonal problems in their adult lives (Kourkoutas, 2006).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Sample

2.1.1 Quantitative Research

Throughout this study, aspects of 520 teachers (N: 217 Kindergarten Teachers and N: 303 Primary School Teachers) in the Region of Epirus were investigated in words of inclusion, inclusive education, various transition phases and acquisition of social skills for children with special educational needs or disabilities.

2.1.2 The Learning Programme of Educative Intervention

An education programme throughout pupils (N: 11) with autism spectrum disorders was implemented, which allowed us to study in depth the notion of inclusion and practices of acquiring social skills.

The respective tools used for the quantitative and qualitative data analysis of the training program in speech are as follows:

- ✓ Questionnaires with open-ended questions
- ✓ Observation sheets
- ✓ Personalized programmes
- ✓ Interviews with teachers
- ✓ Notions
- ✓ Differentiated teaching
- ✓ Music
- ✓ Songs for each learning course
- ✓ Preschool and education programmes, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, High / Scope on space and materials (Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2014)
- ✓ Exploitation of ICT

2.2 Data Analysis

Each sheet of answers per questionnaire was collected, coded and processed using the SPSS statistical package. The analysis of the research data follows the methodological course according to which the researcher draws up, analyzes, interprets and evaluates the tables, diagrammes and respective answers per question.

3. Presentation Of The Results Of The Survey

3.1. Factors That Assert Influence on the Successful Integration of Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

By analyzing the data we conclude that (Table 1), for the Kindergarten Teachers, the most important factor of integration is the parallel support given by an Educator (general mean: 1,73), then the teacher's ability to deal with behavioural problems (general mean: 3,19) then the social integration of children with difficulties with their peers (general mean: 3,27), followed by the modification of the curriculum (general mean: 4,02) and- finally- the class environment (general mean: 4,17) and the teaching style (general mean: 4.53). Teachers classify these factors in the following order of preference: an Educator with parallel support (general mean: 2.52), a modification in the curriculum (general mean:3,16), the teacher's ability to deal with behavioural problems (mean 3,23), social inclusion with peers (general mean 3,74), the classroom environment (general mean: 3,89), the last factor in importance for teachers and the teaching style (general mean: 4,38). The above mentioned results are validated by the t-Independent Samples Test method, through which we find that there is a statistically significant difference between the Kindergarten Teacher and Primary School Teacher in the factors, parallel support (t = -5,462, df = 518, Sig = 0,000), social inclusion (t = -3,434, df = 518, Sig = 0,001), analytic curriculum (t = -5,800, df = 518, Sig = 0,000) and the classroom environment (t = -2,084, df = 518, Sig = 0,038).

Table 1: Prioritizing options of factors for a successful integration

Group Statistics					
	Position from where you serve	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Std. Error Mean**
Teaching style	Kind. teacher	217	4,53	1,534	,104
	Prim. school teacher	303	4,38	1,457	,084
Classroom environment	Kind. teacher	217	4,17	1,306	,089
	Prim. school teacher	303	3,89	1,751	,101
Analytic curriculum modification	Kind. teacher	217	4,02	1,680	,114
	Prim. school teacher	303	3,16	1,658	,095
Teacher's abilities to deal with behavioural problems	Kind. teacher	217	3,19	1,297	,088
	Prim. school teacher	303	3,23	1,302	,075
Social integration of children with special needs along with their peers	Kind. teacher	217	3,27	1,573	,107
	Prim. school teacher	303	3,74	1,544	,089
Educator's parallel support inside the classroom	Kind. teacher	217	1,73	1,237	,084
	Prim. school teacher	303	2,52	1,841	,106

While examining the gender variable, a statistically significant difference is found just in the question of classroom support by an Educator in parallel, where it is ranked as the most important factor amongst women compared to men ($p < 0.001$). In Figure 1 below we can distinguish such a differentiation.

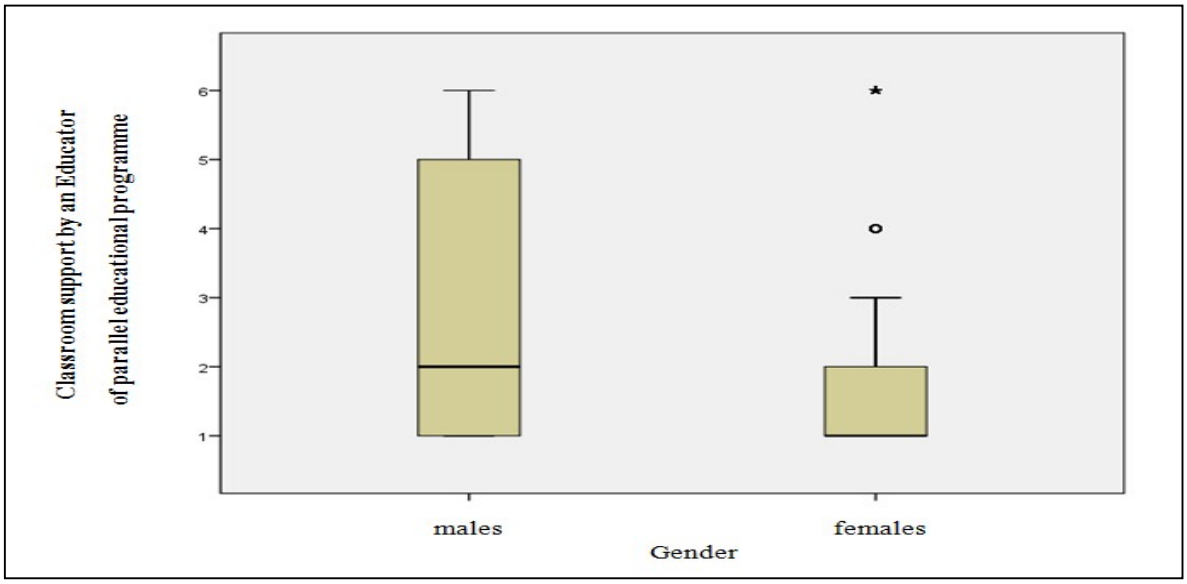

Figure 1: Distribution of the two groups (males - females) according to the point of views expressed by teachers on the factors of a successful integration

3.2 Social Skills as a Factor of a Successful Transition from Kindergarten School to an Elementary School for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

● **Understanding the relationship between verbal and non-verbal messages**

Kindergarten teachers declared in a very high percentage (82.5%) that it is important or very important social skill for children to understand the relationship between verbal and non-verbal messages so that this transition could be successful. A lower, but an equally high percentage (65.3%) of Teachers consider that this skill is important or very important (Table 2). Based on a Pearson Chi square test, there appears to be a statistically significant difference between the answers of Kindergarten and Primary School Teachers. This latter difference concerns answers, that rate neither significant nor insignificant skill for Primary School Teachers 29.7% and for Kindergartens Teachers 17.5% less and a little important skill, which for Primary School Teachers is 5.0% while for Kindergarten Teachers is 0.0%. It is worth noting that there was not a single answer to the range of "unimportant". The above results are validated by the chi square measurement test, where $x^2=23,868^a$, df = 3 and p = 0,000.

Table 2: Total quantitative results for the Category: Verbal and non-verbal messages

Crosstab					
			Position from where you serve		Total
			Kind. Teacher	**Prim. Sch. Teacher**	
Understanding the relationship between verbal and non-verbal messages	A little important	Count	0	15	15
		% within "Position from where you serve"	0,0%	5,0%	2,9%
	Neither important nor insignificant	Count	38	90	128
		% within "Position from where you serve"	17,5%	29,7%	24,6%
	Important	Count	144	164	308
		% within "Position from where you serve"	66,4%	54,1%	59,2%
	Very important	Count	35	34	69
		% within "Position from where you serve"	16,1%	11,2%	13,3%
Total		Count	217	303	520
		% within "Position from where you serve"	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

● Anger control

Kindergarten teacher and primary school teachers consider that is significant (48.3%) or very significant (42.7%) children with special educational needs or disabilities can control their anger before entering into a Primary School. There was no teacher who chose a "no significant skill" answer (Table 3). The above results are validated by the Chi square measurement test where x^2 = 23, 580[a], df = 4 and p = 0,000. From the Pearson Chi square test, there appears to be a statistically significant difference between the answers of Kindergarten and Primary School teachers. The difference is found in the percentage that considers to be neither significant nor insignificant: for the Teachers it is found to 12.9% while for the Kindergarten Teacher at 1.8%. As far it concerns the percentage of Kindergartens or Teachers that consider of little importance the anger control, for the Teachers is 1.3% while for Kindergartens Teachers is 0.0%.

Table 3: Total quantitative outcomes for the category: Anger Control

Crosstab					
			Position from where you serve		**Total**
			Kind. Teacher	**Prim. Sch. Teacher**	
Anger Control	A little important	Count	0	4	4
		% within "Position from where you serve"	0,0%	1,3%	0,8%
	Neither important nor insignificant	Count	4	39	43
		% within "Position from where you serve"	1,8%	12,9%	8,3%
	Important	Count	113	138	251
		% within "Position from where you serve"	52,1%	45,5%	48,3%
	Very important	Count	100	122	222
		% within "Position from where you serve"	46,1%	40,3%	42,7%
Total		Count	217	303	520
		% within "Position from where you serve"	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

● Establishing and preserving relationships

Both Kindergartens and Teachers consider that it is a significant (53.7%) and very important (32.7%) skill when children with special educational needs or disabilities are able to create and maintain relationships before entering primary school. There was no teacher who chose the "No significant skill at all" answer (Table 4). The above results are confirmed by chi square measurement where x^2 = 2,492[a], df = 3 and p = 0,477. From the Pearson Chi square test, there appears to be no statistically significant difference between the answers of Kindergarten and Primary School Teachers.

Table 4: Total quantitative outcomes for the category: Establishing Relationships

Crosstab					
			Position from where you serve		Total
			Kind. Teacher	**Prim. Sch. Teacher**	
Establishing and preserving relationships	A little important	Count	0	3	3
		% within "Position from where you serve"	0,0%	1,0%	0,6%
	Neither important nor insignificant	Count	27	41	68
		% within "Position from where you serve"	12,4%	13,5%	13,1%
	Important	Count	116	163	279
		% within "Position from where you serve"	53,5%	53,8%	53,7%
	Very important	Count	74	96	170
		% within "Position from where you serve"	34,1%	31,7%	32,7%
Total		Count	217	303	520
		% within "Position from where you serve"	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

● Being aware of the rules inside the classroom and each of them to adhere to these rules

Primary School Teachers have chosen in high percentage choose as a very important or important social skill amongst children with disabilities or special educational needs to be aware of the rules and to keep up with them in Primary School. Amongst Kindergarten teachers, this answer accumulates the highest percentages (they think it is important) while in a second phase, the think this is very important (Table 5). The above results are validated by the chi square measurement where x^2 = 28,420[a], df = 2 and p = 0,000. From the Pearson Chi square test, there appears to be a statistically significant difference between the answers of Kindergarten and Primary School Teacher. The difference is found in the percentage that they consider it to be an important skill, for the Teachers is 36.0% while for the Kindergartens 52.5%. As far for the percentage of both categories of Teachers that consider it neither significant nor insignificant, for the Primary School Teachers is 18.2% while for the Kindergarten Teachers 4.1%. There was no teacher who chose the "very important" or "little important skill" option.

Table 5: Total quantitative results for the category: Compliance with Rules

			Position from where you serve		**Total**
			Kind. Teacher	**Prim. Sch. Teacher**	
Being aware of the rules of the class and adhere to them	Neither important nor insignificant	Count	9	55	64
		% within "Position from where you serve"	4,1%	18,2%	12,3%
	Important	Count	114	109	223
		% within "Position from where you serve"	52,5%	36,0%	42,9%
	Very important	Count	94	139	233
		% within "Position from where you serve"	43,3%	45,9%	44,8%
Total		Count	217	303	520
		% within "Position from where you serve"	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

3.3 Improving Social Skills in a Classroom of Inclusive Education for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

● Social Skill: "Making friends"

In the social skill "to make friends" in the middle of the programme (February), six (6) pupils who participated in the programme had improvement and one (1) of them showed no change. At the end (post) of the training programme, all pupils (seven - 7) showed improvement. In the control group, in February, five (5) pupils did not show any change. In June (post), three (3) pupils improved themselves while two (2) showed no change (Table 6). A statistically significant difference exists only for the preschoolers who participated in the training programme, in the middle p = 0.014 and at the end (post) p = 0.011.

Table 6: Distribution of pupils according to their skill level in the social skill: "Making friends"

			Sample number	p-value
Control Group	**"Making friends" mid - "Making friends"pre**	Improvement	0	1,000
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	5	
		In total	5	
	"Making friends"post - "Making friends"pre	Improvement	3	0,083
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	2	
		In total	5	
Intervention group	**"Making friends"mid - "Making friends"pre**	Improvement	6	0,014
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	1	
		In total	7	
	"Making friends"post - "Making friends"pre	Improvement	7	0,011
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	0	
		In total	7	

● **Social Skill: "Expressing his/ her feelings"**

In the social skill "Expressing his/ her feelings" in the middle of the programme (February), five (5) pupils who participated in the programme had improvement and two (2) of them showed no change. At the end (post) of the training programme, all six (6) pupils showed improvement. In the control group, in February, five (5) pupils did not show any change. In June (post), once again five (5) pupils showed no change (Table 7). A statistically significant difference exists only for the preschoolers who participated in the training programme, and exclusively in the middle of the programme (middle) p = 0,025.

Table 7: Distribution of pupils according to their skill level in the social skill: "Expressing his/ her feelings"

			Sample number	p-value
Control Group	"To express his/ her feelings" mid - "To express his/ her feelings"pre	Improvement	0	1,000
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	5	
		In total	5	
	"To express his/ her feelings"post - "To express his/ her feelings"pre	Improvement	0	1,000
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	5	
		In total	5	
Intervention group	"To express his/ her feelings"mid - "To express his/ her feelings" pre	Improvement	5	0,025
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	2	
		In total	7	
	"To express his/ her feelings"post - "To express his/ her feelings"pre	Improvement	6	0,058
		Deterioration	1	
		No change	0	
		In total	7	

● **Social Skill: "Working in groups"**

In the social skill "Working in groups" in the middle of the programme (February), three (3) pupils who participated in the programme had improvement and four (4) of them showed no change. At the end (post) of the training programme, all seven (7) pupils showed an improvement. In the control group, in February, four (4) pupils did not show any change while one (1) of them showed an improvement. In June (post), three (3) pupils showed an improvement while two (2) of them showed no change (Table 8). A statistically significant difference exists only for the preschoolers who participated in the training programme, and exclusively in the end of the programme (post) p = 0, 008.

Table 8: Distribution of pupils according to their skill level in the social skill: "Working in groups"

			Sample number	p-value
Control Group	"Working in groups" mid - "Working in groups" pre	Improvement	1	0,317
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	4	
		In total	5	
	"Working in groups" post - "Working in groups" pre	Improvement	3	0,083
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	2	
		In total	5	
Intervention group	"Working in groups" mid - "Working in groups" pre	Improvement	3	0,083
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	4	
		In total	7	
	"Working in groups" post - "Working in groups" pre	Improvement	7	0,008
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	0	
		In total	7	

● **Social Skill: "Follow the school rules"**

In the social skill "Follow the school rules" in the middle of the programme (February), six (7) pupils who participated in the programme had improvement and one (1) of them showed no change. At the end (post) of the training programme, all seven (7) pupils showed an improvement. In the control group, in February, five (5) pupils did not show any change. In June (post), one (1) pupil showed an improvement while four (4) of them showed no change (Table 9). A statistically significant difference exists only for the preschoolers who participated in the training programme, in the middle p = 0,014 and in the end of the programme (post) p = 0, 015.

Table 9: Distribution of pupils according to their skill level in the social skill: "Follow the school rules"

			Sample number	p-value
Control Group	"Follow the school rules" mid - "Follow the school rules" pre	Improvement	0	1,000
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	5	
		In total	5	
	"Follow the school rules" post - "Follow the school rules" pre	Improvement	1	0,317
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	4	
		In total	5	
Intervention group	"Follow the school rules" mid - "Follow the school rules" pre	Improvement	6	0,014
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	1	
		In total	7	
	"Follow the school rules" post - "Follow the school rules" pre	Improvement	7	0,015
		Deterioration	0	
		No change	0	
		In total	7	

4.

4. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

Based on the evaluation of our educational programme and conform to many researchers, the positive attitude of Educators is the most important variable affecting the successful integration of children with disabilities into a general class (Bender *et al.*, 1995; Buell *et al.*, 1999; Chow & Winzer, 1992; Jamieson, 1984), while inclusive education is of crucial importance and is part of the environmental factors that give influence of integration as a key factor of change (Gal *et al.*, 2010). Thus, it is vital to adopt transitional steps for adopting a participatory education model concerning the school, the society and the education policy (Bender *et al.*, 1995; Gal *et al.*, 2010). In a high quality and enhanced inclusive practices class, Educators provide opportunities for social skills to all children, accept their differences, plan and apply, modify and adapt, so that all children be involved in their individualised level.

These individualised diversifications are the key to successfully integrating curricula into the day-care programme of any Kindergarten School and acquiring communicative and social skills (King, 2006). Educators who participated in our Study used a variety of teaching strategies to support the effective inclusion of students with special educational needs and the acquisition of social skills such as scaffolding, modeling, conflict management and problem solving (Callan, 2013; Flem *et al.*, 2004).

Harrower and Dunlap (2001) studied strategies for integrating children with autism spectrum disorders such as self-management strategies, peer-to-peer interventions and complex interventions, and found that autistic pupils could be included successfully in classrooms if they were supported and facilitated. In this direction, the results of this exploratory study also converge. Adopting strategies and applying approaches for inclusion in the general class is important for providing inclusive education for pupils with special educational needs or disabilities. These strategies are not geared towards specific categories but according to international literature they refer to (Rix, *et al.*, 2009):

- the collaboration amongst various personnel of these Schools,
- the commitment to learning procedure by all pupils,
- the diversification of teaching spectrum,
- And, last but not least, the recognition of social interaction as a mean for the Successful inclusion of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities.

Specific studies, involving children from 3 to 5 years old, have shown that social interventions for skills development can positively increase social interactions and reduce behavioural problems (Vaughn *et al.*, 2003). Our paper also came into the same conclusions, by analyzing aspects of educators through their experience and the results of educational programme of intervention.

Both Kindergarten and Primary School Teachers, participated in our study- consider the Educator of parallel support, being applied in Greece since year 2010 in the context of the inclusive education and the construction of "one school for all" ideal, as an important factor of inclusive education. Via dissemination of this idea, children with severe disabilities are able to attend general class programme and experience a substantially needed support. Gradually, the number of those people who believe that children with special educational needs do need only care is gradually decreased, while it is strengthened the aspect that via an appropriate educational support these persons can be integrated into a general school.

Our participants (teachers) believe that general and special education aims to involve each pupil in school and social activities and to ensure that each pupil acquires attitudes and skills to move smoothly from one to the next level of school tier but it is necessary to train them on subjects of inclusion and participatory education. In order preschoolers to obtain social skills, we took into account the learning styles of children with disorders in the autism spectrum, we relied on conquered skills, we gave another dimension of such a knowledge through the method of generalization.

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