

## Key principles of inclusive education and main challenges of implementing inclusive practice at preschool level in Greece

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### ABSTRACT

*Participation in high quality preschool education has long-term positive effects on children's development and the benefits are greater for children at risk of exclusion and from vulnerable environments. Modern and inclusive societies respond with equity and social justice to the diverse needs of the population. In this context, inclusive pre-school education aims at quality education for all learners, with equal opportunities for access, learning and achievement. Inclusion requires a significant change of mindset and a process of systemic reform and coordinated action at various levels, such as legal, political, organizational, pedagogical, educational, etc. Actions to transform the education system to meet the academic and social learning needs of all learners. In this article we report a study on investigation of the training needs, knowledge and skills of preschool teachers in Greece, for the implementation of inclusive education. Quantitative data obtained through a questionnaire were supplemented by preschool teacher interviews. In particular, the survey captured the thoughts, experiences, and priorities of policy makers on inclusive pre-school education at European and national level. It also included questionnaires and interviews with key people in the education process in Greece about their thoughts and experiences on "what, how and why" different factors and conditions could facilitate effective inclusive practices. The findings can contribute to the improvement of inclusive practices at preschool education and influence the policy and practice of inclusive education in Greece.*

### KEYWORDS

*Inclusive education, early childhood education and care, pre-school inclusive education, pre-school teachers' training needs*

### RÉSUMÉ

*La participation à l'éducation préscolaire de qualité a des effets positifs à long terme sur le développement des enfants et les avantages sont plus importants pour les enfants menacés d'exclusion et issus de milieux vulnérables. Les sociétés modernes et inclusives répondent avec*

*équité et justice sociale aux divers besoins de la population. Dans ce contexte, l'éducation préscolaire inclusive vise une éducation de qualité pour tous les apprenants, avec des chances égales d'accès, d'apprentissage et de réussite. L'inclusion nécessite un changement significatif des mentalités et un processus de réforme systémique et d'action coordonnée à différents niveaux, tels que juridique, politique, organisationnel, pédagogique, éducatif, etc. Des actions visant à transformer le système éducatif pour répondre aux besoins d'apprentissage académique et social de tous les apprenants. Dans cet article, nous rapportons une étude sur l'investigation des besoins de formation, des connaissances et des compétences des enseignants du préscolaire en Grèce, pour la mise en œuvre de l'éducation inclusive. Les données quantitatives obtenues par le biais d'un questionnaire ont été complétées par des entretiens avec des enseignants du préscolaire. L'enquête a notamment permis de recueillir les réflexions, les expériences et les priorités des décideurs politiques en matière d'éducation préscolaire inclusive au niveau européen et national. Il comprenait également des questionnaires et des entretiens avec des personnes clés dans le processus éducatif en Grèce sur leurs pensées et expériences sur "quoi, comment et pourquoi" différents facteurs et conditions pourraient faciliter des pratiques inclusives efficaces. Les résultats peuvent contribuer à l'amélioration des pratiques d'inclusion dans l'enseignement préscolaire et influencer la politique et la pratique de l'éducation inclusive en Grèce.*

## **MOTS CLÉS**

*Éducation inclusive, éducation et accueil de la petite enfance, éducation inclusive préscolaire, besoins de formation des enseignants du préscolaire*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last three decades, more and more countries have been promoting a non-discriminatory and inclusive society, open and responsive to human diversity. A modern society that responds with equity and social justice to the diverse needs of the population. In this context, inclusive education aims at quality education for all students, with equal opportunities for access, learning and achievement. Inclusion requires a significant change of mindset and a process of systemic reform and coordinated action at various levels, such as legal, political, organizational, pedagogical, educational, etc. Actions to transform the education system to meet the academic and social learning needs of all students. At the same time, important research has been carried out at European and international level on the concept of inclusive education and in particular on the importance of quality in inclusive practice, as well as on the perceptions and attitudes of all key players in the educational community.

International organizations and the European Union (EU) consider that high quality education and care for young children is a key foundation for lifelong learning and a prerequisite for success in modern knowledge-based economies. Participation in high quality preschool education has long-term positive effects on children's development and the benefits are greater for children from disadvantaged and vulnerable environments. For this reason, the European Commission's strategy for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) has set the target of having at least 95% of children aged four years participating in pre-school education by the time they reach compulsory education. The ISCED International Definition of "Preschool Education" states that: "Preschool education (ISCED 0) is defined as the initial stage of organized teaching, designed primarily to introduce very young children to a school-type environment, that is, to provide a bridge between home and school atmosphere. ISCED level 0 programs should take place in an educational center or school, be designed to meet the educational and developmental needs of children at least three years old, and have staff who

are properly trained (i.e., specialized) to provide an educational program for children” (OECD, 2002, p. 372).

This article focuses on “inclusive preschool education” as defined by UNESCO: An ongoing process that aims to provide quality education for all with respect for diversity and different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of students and the community, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination (UNESCO, 2008, p. 18). Inclusion is considered to be an issue for the education system and not for individual students or groups: inclusion is seen as a systemic approach to providing high quality education in general education schools that responds effectively to the academic and social learning needs of all learners from the local school community (European Agency, 2015, p. 2). The article focuses on all children, including those at risk of socio-economic exclusion (disadvantaged groups, migrants, refugees, people with disabilities, etc.) from the age of three until the start of primary education (six years). The EU Quality Framework provides the following definition of children at risk: Children may be at risk of being disadvantaged because of individual circumstances or because they or their family belong to a disadvantaged group in society. This category may include children with disabilities, mental health problems, in alternative care, at risk of neglect / abuse, children of undocumented migrants / asylum seekers, children whose families live in poverty or socially disadvantaged, children from families who have migrated and / or have a different language, children whose families have limited access to services, Roma and children of travelers (European Commission, 2014, p. 68).

The new approach to equity and inclusive preschool education for all children is interpreted with the implementation of “one school for all”, which requires flexible education systems and sufficient know-how of teachers in order to meet the requirements of the academic and social learning needs of all learners, respecting their diversity. The Council of the European Union conclusions on the social dimension of education and training in 2010 call on the Member States to promote successful inclusive education approaches for all students in pre-school and school education, including people with disabilities, making schools learning communities based on a sense of inclusion and mutual support and recognizing the talents of all students (Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 5). In December 2017, the European Council, European Parliament and the Commission endorsed the adoption of the European Pillar of social rights. The agreement highlights the importance of the social, educational and cultural dimensions of EU policies for building a common European future. The first principle of the European Pillar of social rights underlines that: “Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market” (European Commission, 2017).

In 2019, the European Commission announced the initiative to create a European Guarantee for Children to ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic rights such as health care and education. In 2019, almost 18 million children in the EU (22.2% of the child population) lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This leads to a cycle of disadvantages between the generations, with profound and long-term effects on children. The goal of the European Child Guarantee, adopted by the Council in June 2021, is to prevent and combat social exclusion by ensuring that children in need have access to a set of basic services: pre-school education and care, education (including school activities), health care, nutrition, housing. While most children in the EU already have access to these services, inclusive and truly universal access is vital to ensuring equal opportunities for all children, especially those experiencing social exclusion due to poverty or other forms of disadvantage. The European Child Guarantee itself will only be effective in the context of a wider set of integrated measures, as outlined in the action plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, and in the broader policy framework of the EU Child Rights Strategy

(Council of the European Union, 2021). UNICEF, in cooperation with the European Commission, works with national, regional and local authorities as well as selected civil society organizations, children and young people to design and implement services and interventions that reduce the impact of poverty and social exclusion on children in need of support and protection. This includes the most vulnerable children, such as Roma children, children in institutions, children with disabilities and children of refugees and migrants. In particular, UNICEF, in cooperation with the European Commission is implementing a two-year project to support the implementation of the Program in Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and Spain. These countries will test innovative approaches to implementing national action plans to reduce child poverty and address systemic exclusion and discrimination for particularly vulnerable groups of children and ensure that these vulnerable children and their families have access to quality services. The two-year program “Child Guarantee” in Greece consists of six actions / pillars:

- Pillar 1: Support for deinstitutionalization and enhanced care in Community structures.
- Pillar 2: Reinforcement of the contractor system.
- Pillar 3: Introduce and support autonomous living to support children's transition to adulthood.
- Pillar 4: Investing in life skills and work readiness for vulnerable youth.
- Pillar 5: Enhancing inclusive education.
- Pillar 6: Research to update and strengthen national strategies focusing on eradicating child poverty as well as their social inclusion efforts.

The new human rights approach of inclusive education requires a change of mentality and a different pedagogical approach. Instead of providing individual support to individual students, support systems should aim to increase the capacity / empowerment of schools to meet the different needs of all students. This requires a change of attitudes and values by all involved to support the change of schools so that they can meet the needs of all learners. The change of mentality and attitudes of teachers plays a key role in promoting the new approach and in changing and strengthening schools. Many researchers consider teacher attitudes to be crucial in ensuring the successful inclusion of learners by vulnerable groups. By “attitude” we generally mean the evaluation of posture objects that contain anything one may have in mind, which may be specific or abstract (Bohner & Dickel, 2011). In order to meet the diverse educational needs of students, schools and teachers need to change and adapt their practices (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). The implementation of an inclusive policy depends to a large extent, *inter alia*, on teachers' beliefs, willingness and attitudes.

More experienced teachers have more positive attitudes than less experienced teachers, and a positive past experience with children from vulnerable groups contributes to teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusive education (Dias & Cadime 2016; Galović et al., 2014; Vasileiadis et al., 2021). Regarding the differences between teachers in terms of the level of their in-service training in inclusion, the findings of relevant studies show that continuing education in inclusion has positive effects on teachers' attitudes. In-service training as well as inclusive teaching arrangements provide teachers with a sense of competence for the successful teaching of learners with diverse needs, thus enhancing their self-confidence and effectiveness in inclusion (Malinen et al., 2013). Azorín and Ainscow (2020) argue that inclusion is increasingly recognized as the main driver for educational reform and is a central goal on the international political agenda.

Positive attitudes contribute significantly to the process of changing the pedagogical approach, but they are not enough to substantially strengthen schools. In order to be able to successfully meet the needs of all students in the class, teachers must have the necessary knowledge and skills related to inclusive education. Pantic and Florian (2015) report that

policies around the world increasingly require teachers to become “agents of change”, and this is often linked to social justice issues. Inclusive practice requires the cooperation of teachers and others, such as families and other professionals. For successful preschool inclusion for children from vulnerable groups to receive the expected benefits, teachers must attend appropriate initial teacher training and education programs that provide them with a substantial experience to acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills. (Gilor & Katz, 2018; Underwood et al., 2012).

Some research addresses the gap between theory and practice in relation to inclusive education programs. This is expressed by teachers who deal with the various issues that arise on a daily basis. Although teachers are aware of the benefits of students from vulnerable groups from inclusion and theoretically have a positive attitude towards its implementation, they report that they often feel exposed to the problems that arise on a daily basis and the lack of appropriate support from the competent bodies. They typically emphasize that theory is far from practice. (Vasileiadis et al., 2021). Barton and Smith (2015) state that policies are challenges for inclusion regarding program quality, staffing, funding, transportation, curriculum, attitudes and perceptions about inclusion, cooperation between general and special education and staff. Appropriate access, participation and support ensures all learners are actively involved in the physical and social environment. Similarly, in Greece, inclusion requires a significant change of mentality and a process of systemic reform that covers all aspects of education (legislation, curriculum, pedagogical and school organization). The scope of this article is to present and discuss the main findings of a study on investigating the training needs, knowledge, and skills of preschool teachers in Greece and analyzing a number of factors and conditions that seem to be effective in inclusive practices for children from the age of three until the beginning of primary education.

## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The methodology used to explore and analyze the educational needs of pre-school teachers for inclusive education is the sequential explanatory mixed methods research strategy, a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection. The sequential explanatory strategy is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Priority is usually given to quantitative data and both methods are integrated during the interpretation phase of the study. The purpose of the sequential explanatory strategy is usually to use qualitative results to help explain and interpret the findings of a predominantly quantitative study (Creswell, 2012). The research included top-down and bottom-up methods to address the following key questions:

- How do the key partners in pre-school education - school principals, teachers, special educators - deal with issues that promote pre-school inclusive education? (What do they consider to be the main principles and most important challenges of effective inclusive practice?)
- What do the key partners in pre-school education think is needed for the quality and effective implementation of inclusive pre-school education?
- What are the educational needs of pre-school teachers, in order to be able to support the implementation of inclusive education policies.

In particular, the survey captured the thoughts, experiences and priorities of policy makers on inclusive pre-school education at European and national level. It also included questionnaires and interviews with key people in the education process in Greece about their thoughts and experiences on “what, how and why” different factors and conditions could facilitate effective

inclusion practices. The Delphi method was used to collect information on the views, priorities and problems of policy makers as well as teachers on inclusive education at European and national level. This method, when used to assess educational needs, relies on a team of experts to identify and reach consensus on educational needs (Queeney, 1995, p. 132). The results of the Delphi analysis were used as the main axes for the next phase of the quantitative and qualitative research and in particular for the formulation of questionnaires to preschool teachers and interviews with preschool professionals. The quantitative research used an open-ended quantitative questionnaire, addressed to early years teachers, to collect information to understand how quality and inclusion work in practice. Analysis of the data from the questionnaires informed the next stage of the research, the interviews. A questionnaire with semi-structured questions was then used to conduct 15 interviews with early childhood education practitioners in Greece, with the aim of collecting information and gaining qualitative insights into the practice of inclusion at the early childhood education level

The quantitative method refers to the systematic investigation of phenomena using statistical methods, mathematical models and numerical data. It usually uses a representative sample of observations and seeks generalization to a wider population. Data are collected using structured protocols such as questionnaires, scales and performance tests. The quantitative method allows for statistical processing of the data in order to quantify the respondents' views on the issue under consideration. (Babbie, 2010; De Vaus, 2001; Gray et al., 2007).

Qualitative research aims to explore and understand social phenomena in depth. The researcher answers questions related to the “Why?” and “How?” of these phenomena. The qualitative approach is a fundamentally exploratory method. Qualitative research is related to the collection of opinions and experiences that will synthesize conclusions based on how the researcher interprets the experiences of the respondents (Creswell, 2012). In fact, the phenomenon under investigation is based on the perceptions, beliefs, experiences of the subjects and the way in which they experience the phenomenon in question in order to produce a deeper knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation, taking into account the wider historical, social and economic context (Flick, 2006).

### *The Delphi method*

The Delphi method is a structured research method in which a series of questionnaires are drawn up and distributed to a group of experts in order to gather information on the topic under investigation. The process is completed when maximum consensus is reached among the members of the group (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). It is based on the principle that predictions (or decisions) by a structured group of individuals are more accurate than those of unstructured groups. This method is widely used in various scientific fields, including in the field of education, as well as for business forecasting. The main features of the Delphi method are anonymity, replication, controlled feedback and statistical analysis of data (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). Advantages of the method are the ability of participants to express their personal opinions through data derived from the experience and interaction of all group members, and the absence of geographical restrictions, as questionnaires are usually completed by e-mail. Delphi is a flexible research methodology and for this reason several variations have been developed.

For the present study, the two-round Delphi method was used as the first phase of the research, with the aim of creating a comprehensive list of topics that would constitute the axes for the formulation of the questionnaires to be used in qualitative and quantitative research with teachers in early childhood education. This method was not used to achieve full consensus among the expert group members on educational needs. The aim was to generate a range of complementary suggestions characterized by variety and diversity. This process could be described as a structured dialogue. This process involved 'selective anonymity', i.e., the views

of the participants were not communicated by name but after a process that ensured their anonymity. Other features included the possibility for participants to revise views, controlled feedback and structured conflict of views. The composition of the expert panel in the Delphi method is very important, as their validity determines the validity of the research results. The selection of the group of experts involved in the research method was done with great care. They were selected on the basis of their formal qualifications (postgraduate and doctoral degrees in subjects related or relevant to education and inclusive education) and their professional activity related to early childhood education and inclusive education (universities, ministries of education, education policy makers, teachers, etc.) at national and European level. The common denominator of the group members was that all of them at national and/or European level have long experience in research, educational policy design and implementation of inclusive education at all levels of education. This quality ensures to a large extent the validity of the research results.

Ethical issues such as confidentiality and information were taken into account from the beginning of the research process. The participants were informed about the objectives of the research, the time that their participation would require as well as the possibility to withdraw if they wished. During the research cycles / phases they had the opportunity to contact me for clarifications about the research. In both rounds of the questionnaires, the participation was 100%. The anonymity of the participants was fully respected throughout the research. The presentation of the views was done in a way that did not reveal the identity of the participants. It is important to mention that during the research the principles of mutual respect, lack of pressure and non-manipulation were observed, as well as the sense of ethical issues that exist in each research exercise (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

In total, the whole process of the two rounds Delphi method lasted five (5) months, within the time frame of the initial schedule, without substantial problems and delays in the responses by the 20 participants. The following seven (7) thematic areas emerged:

- 1) Theoretical conception-approach of inclusive education
- 2) Focus of policy development on inclusive education
- 3) Key priorities in the process of implementing inclusive education
- 4) Main challenges in implementing inclusive education at different levels (national, local, school, classroom)
- 5) Training needs of educators and support staff in inclusive pre-primary education
- 6) Initial pre-school teachers and support staff training in inclusive education)
- 7) In-service training and professional development in inclusive competence areas

The relatively large consensus on the priorities and challenges in implementation as well as the educational needs of teachers and other professionals, indicates that in recent years inclusive education has been high on the educational reform agenda in most European countries. It also states that inclusive education is a long-term process that requires a coordinated effort at various levels such as clear legislation assisted by support policies and action plans, proper information and cooperation between all stakeholders at national, regional and local level, active participation the families and the students themselves throughout the process, etc. The "Theoretical Approach" to Inclusive Education" is high on the list of participants' preferences / views, along with the other thematic areas. Emphasis was placed on the sections on exploring the relationship between the main principles of inclusion and practical implementation in schools, the extent to which teachers are adequately prepared to address the diversity needs in schools, the extent to which legislation, policy and practice contribute to reform and change of mentality, the dimension of the right of all students to inclusion and benefits for all, as well as the collective responsibility of implementation in preschool schools. Also, at the top of the list is the "Focus on Inclusive Education Policy Making". This field includes issues very important

for the formulation of educational policy, which respects and responds to the diversity of needs of all students. The modules prioritized by the participants, including the Greeks, cover the identification of shortcomings in current policies, the relationship between educational and social inclusion, educational policies for appropriate initial and continuing education of teachers, the relationship between macro, through and micro-system, as well as at national, regional and local level.

In the process of implementing inclusive education, the participants set some priorities that they consider very important. The “key priorities” include a study of the effectiveness of policies and the mechanism of cooperation between institutions, an investigation of the relationship between the availability and affordability of services, a study of the effectiveness of support systems, teaching materials, leadership and cooperation between social services of education and health. The participants agreed on the “Main challenges in the implementation of inclusive education”. The key word, according to them, is to change education policies, practices and attitudes as well as to build consensus through a long-term process of innovative actions. Emphasis was placed on the analysis of concepts, practices and structures that need to change as well as the changes that need to be made in this multilevel process. Among the challenges, they gave priority to the change of attitude of professionals and families, the insufficient training of professionals, the lack of pedagogical strategies and appropriate educational material, the lack of action plans for implementation, the lack of sufficient resources as well as the lack of good leadership in school level. Regarding the “Educational needs of teachers and support staff”, the consent of the participants included training for the acquisition of skills in subjects / subjects such as co-teaching, the design and implementation of individualized educational programs, the use of universal planning for teaching and learning, the use of flexible and holistic curricula as well as assessment techniques. The role of the “integration coordinator” and the director were also considered important by the participants.

### *Quantitative part*

The questionnaire was chosen as it is considered the most widely used tool for collecting quantitative data (Clark-Carter, 2010). Using the questionnaire, the researcher is able to collect data from a large number of people in a short period of time. It is easy to code and process as it provides structured and numbered data and is therefore suitable for statistical analysis. It also can correlate variables and thus identify both empirical trends and covariates. In addition, it ensures to a greater extent the anonymity of research participants and prevents researcher bias. The electronic questionnaire allows the researcher to design it in such a way as to make it more attractive to the respondent without much cost. For this study, an electronic, individual and anonymous questionnaire was formulated for this study, which was administered to preschool teachers nationwide, along with an introductory explanatory note. The questions reflected the general purpose and specific objectives of the study. In the introduction of the questionnaire there was an assurance that anonymity was ensured in order for the respondent to feel more secure and to answer the questions honestly (Cohen et al., 2007). The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, of which 18 were closed-ended questions and seven were open-ended questions. The questions referred to demographics (gender, age group, education, years of teaching experience and experience with children from diverse backgrounds, place of work and residence, type of school, and type of school assignments), knowledge and skills that the teacher should have for practicing inclusive classrooms, and barriers to implementing inclusion in preschools. They also referred to the adequacy of teacher training in inclusion, cooperation with parents and other educational staff, cooperation between pupils and the availability of appropriate pedagogical/educational materials.

The quantitative survey was conducted during the years 2020-2021. The questionnaire was completed electronically by 300 preschool teachers and 255 were fully completed and used



for data analysis and quantitative survey conclusions. Of the 255 teachers, 248 (97.3%) were female and 7 (2.7%) were male. Regarding the age group of the participants, the majority of them are 31-40 years old (51%) and (27.8%) are 41-50 years old, while none of the participants in our study are over 60 years old. Regarding the participants' education, apart from the first degree, 6 out of 10 responded "other" (65.9%). 22.8% of our sample stated that they have a postgraduate degree. While it is worth noting that 7.3% of the participants have obtained a second degree and only 4.1% of the sample holds a PhD. In terms of years of teaching experience, half of our sample participants ranged from 11 to 20 years (53.5%), followed by smaller percentages of "21 to 30" (25.2%) and "1 to 10" (18.1%). A very small percentage of our sample is in the age group of 31 years and older (3.1%). In addition to years of teaching experience, participants were asked about their years of experience with children from different backgrounds/needs. Most teachers in the sample, 6 out of 10 participants, reported having 11 to 20 years of experience (60.9%) and 30.8% reported having 1 to 10 years of experience.

### *Qualitative part*

The interview was chosen as a methodological tool. The interview has the advantage of dialogue and discussion between the researcher and the interviewees, thus giving the latter the opportunity to raise any questions and ambiguities in order to answer as reliably as possible. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the pedagogical methods and techniques used by the teachers and to explore their teaching needs in order to be able to include all children in the learning and social activities of the nursery. The interview questionnaire included five thematic areas and 32 open-ended questions. The thematic areas included demographic data, questions related to the theoretical approach and basic principles of inclusive education, questions about teachers' attitudes and opinions about inclusive education, questions about the knowledge and skills they should have and the appropriate training to implement inclusive practice, and questions about the curriculum. In addition, teachers were asked to indicate the advice they would give to another early childhood teacher trying to implement inclusive practice. The qualitative research was conducted in the year 2021 and 15 interviews were conducted with teachers who agreed to participate in the study. The duration of each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants. Seven of these were conducted by telephone and eight were conducted online. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher introduced the purpose of the study and tried to create a friendly atmosphere to facilitate the flow of the interview.

The wording and order of the questions were determined according to the flow of each interview. It was estimated that the survey could be completed with 15 interviews because there was a saturation effect. The data analysis process involved the following steps: a) Organizing and transcribing the interview data, b) Exploring and coding the data, c) Developing categories and subcategories, and d) Grouping into themes. (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, once the interviews were completed and we had the data, we moved on to the process of recording (transferring the recorded material into a text file). Particular emphasis was placed on reading and infiltrating the recorded data in order to capture the general picture of what the interviewees said, their attitudes towards specific issues and their use of the data for further exploration. Based on what has just been mentioned, we proceeded to manual coding, which aimed to capture as best as possible the topic under consideration - based on the combination of words and ideas presented.

## **PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Through the interviews conducted, we observed that almost the entire group of interviewees approaches inclusive education, based on the equality it ensures. This equality refers to equal

educational opportunities for every child, excluding none. Inclusive education, according to the interviewees, includes in the daily life the children who belong to vulnerable groups, who now feel familiar with the school environment, since the lessons are taught in the same class as their peers.

*“Inclusive education refers to the equal rights that children from vulnerable groups (refugees, children with special educational needs, abused children, etc.) have in education with all other children. Inclusion is the possibility for all children to be educated in the same school, in the same classroom”.*

*“The main purpose of inclusive education is to (include) all children in the classroom regardless of their differences or difficulties in order to contribute to the creation of "a school for all without exclusions... An educational framework where all children can be developed according to their abilities and talents”.*

The group of interviewees seems to link inclusive education to both the key principles of a democratically structured society and fundamental human rights. These two elements are revealed in the following interview excerpts:

*“The rationale for policy development in inclusive education is based on a human rights approach to education, which emphasizes the right of every learner to high-quality pre-school education opportunities”.*

*“Inclusive education or a "school for all" reflects the human rights approach to high quality non-discriminatory education for all students in the local school with friends and classmates. "Inclusive education takes into account the needs of students' heterogeneity and aims to remove barriers to learning and ensure equal access to education for all students, including students with disabilities”.*

Inclusive education is a cross-border goal, as it is one of the main pillars of the European vision in terms of education. Greece, as well as many other European countries, as the interviewees point out, make significant efforts to make inclusion a key component of the daily educational work produced.

*“Internationally, inclusion is a critical issue and holds one of the most important positions in the educational world. In the European field of education, "inclusive education" is mentioned as one of the most important programs and is constantly promoted either through the policy of the European Union or through the effort to implement good and new practices in schools”.*

*“Over the last three decades, inclusive / inclusive education and the integration of children with special educational needs (SEN) children from other vulnerable groups in schools has been widely applied in all European education systems, as an innovative educational approach. Greece, like many European countries, has adopted pedagogical practices that promote inclusion”.*

Acceptance of diversity is presented by most interviewees as the basic condition for the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, it can be considered as one of the main principles of inclusive education

*“For inclusion to be valid, there must be respect for diversity, equal opportunities in learning and equal opportunities in quality education with peers”.*

*“In practice, in order for inclusion to be implemented, there must be certain conditions: one of them is the culture of acceptance by all school teachers and in particular the school leadership”.*

But what are the other principles that the interviewees cite in their approaches? What do they consider to be a necessary component for the successful implementation of inclusive education? What is emphasized in almost all interviews is that the basic principle for the implementation of inclusive education is cooperation, both at school level, i.e., between teachers, but also between school and the student's family. It is also pointed out that the teacher must prepare a program and material, which is adapted to the needs of all children, offering

benefits in terms of learning. In addition, staff (teachers and other professionals involved) need to be adequately trained to meet the challenges of everyday school life within the framework of inclusive education.

There are many interviewees who also refer to the Ministry of Education, emphasizing the support that the Ministry must offer to pre-school teachers, in order to fulfill the vision of inclusive education. Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that a change of mentality is required among all those involved in the educational community and the society in general. The interviewees also referred to the lack of strategies for the actual involvement of parents in the learning process of their children.

*“The basic principles include: a) respect for diversity, believing that all children can succeed, b) cooperation between all stakeholders - schools, teachers, other professionals, support staff, parents, students and c) a holistic approach for a curriculum for all children with the aim of promoting all aspects of children's development and learning”.*

*“The basic principles and priorities for the implementation of inclusive education are:... raising awareness about inclusive education... quality teacher training... the basic collaborations to be established with parents, other local schools, universities and other community services (such as diagnostic centers, treatment services)”.*

*“Inclusion requires a significant change of mentality and a process of systemic reform that covers all aspects of education (legislation, curriculum, pedagogical and school organization)”.*

It is important to mention the difference between the term “integration” and the term “inclusion”. According to the interviewees, through integration, the student has to make an effort and adapt to the educational routine. On the contrary, through inclusion there is a comprehensive, so to speak, modification of the educational approach, encouraging the student to maintain his diversity, without deviating from the personal development (at a broader level) he has chosen. In other words, the basis is the change in the character of the educational system and not in the daily life of the student.

*“Integration promotes access to children from vulnerable groups such as children with SEN in general schools with the necessary support and personalized modification of the curriculum, teaching processes, etc. In the integration model, the classroom system remains the same and children with SEN must adapt to it. Inclusion respects the diversity of children and argues that all children are different and have the right to learn, and according to the inclusion model the system needs to change to meet the needs of all children and not children to adapt to the system. The main difference with inclusion is that the education system must change in order to be able to meet the needs of all children and not the other way around, i.e., the child has to adapt to the system”.*

Participants in quantitative research also indicated the main challenges they face for the implementation of inclusive education in pre-school today, presented in Table 1.

In addition to the abovementioned challenges, 2/3 of the interviewees of the qualitative research stressed that teachers' negative attitudes play a key role in the implementation of inclusive practices. Through the interviews it was seen that there are many teachers who underestimate inclusive education, others who do not accept it and some others are opposed to it.

*“In many cases, the pre-school teachers have a negative attitude towards the inclusion and towards the special educator who is in the classroom for parallel support or the special educator of the integration class. Instead of seeing that through collaboration they can have better results in the classroom, they avoid having another teacher in their classroom”.*

*“Many preschool teachers are very hesitant about inclusion and have a negative attitude towards the possibility of educating heterogeneous groups”.*

**TABLE 1***Main challenges for the implementation of inclusive education in pre-school*

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>%</b>
Lack of knowledge and experience for implementing inclusive education	96.4
Insufficient initial and in-service pre-school teachers' training to meet the needs of all children	96.4
Lack of adequate support of pre-school teachers by specialized staff to meet the needs of all children	95.3
Negative attitudes to inclusive education	95.2
Lack of reasonable accommodations, which means the appropriate modifications and adjustments in both the infrastructure and the curriculum	94.4
Lack of sufficient economic resources	94.4

Other challenges indicated by the participants include lack of education and / or training on issues related to inclusive education, lack of tools and training materials for the implementation of inclusive education, lack of support to pre-school teacher resource allocation issues. Regarding the lack of education, and in some cases a lack of training, in issues related to inclusive education, the interviewees focused on the fact that there is often a lack at the undergraduate level. Many of the curricula consider that they did not focus on inclusive education and its practical application. At the same time, it is stated by a large portion of the participating kindergarten teachers that the trainings related to inclusive education are to a small extent offered, while those offered insist on the theory, but do not present to the teachers the way of application - that is, the practical part is recorded again. inclusive education.

*“Most special educators have been taught at the University at the theoretical level the differentiated instruction but do not know how to apply it in practice. They are forced to find out by researching on their own but there is no organized support in this matter”.*

*“.....Or the lack of knowledge and in particular practical experience of kindergarten teachers in matters of inclusion, such as e.g. the adaptation of the curriculum to the needs of children, the design of a personalized educational program, etc.”.*

Regarding the lack of tools and educational material for the implementation of inclusive education, pre-school teachers indicated that in many cases, with the change of the educational staff almost every year, there is a lack of basic educational material for inclusive practice. The issue of the teacher's self-action is also raised, so that he/she creates the necessary material, since it may either not be provided by the school/Ministry/Institute of Pedagogical Policy at all, or it may be provided late.

*“There is a significant lack of tools and training material for inclusion. Usually, we receive the educational material we ask for at the end of the year or we do not receive it at all. Most of the time the special educators create their own tools and educational material for the needs of the children. But when they leave school, they take it with them”.*

*“Another important problem is the lack of inclusion materials. The special educator working in the integration department is often forced to create inclusion materials such as a letter card, a behavior card, etc., with his/her own money to use with the students. When he/she leaves a school, he/she often takes with him/her the materials he has made”.*

Another challenge for the pre-school teachers is the lack of support they expect for the overall idea of inclusion as well as on individual basis when they need information and help to deal with problems that may arise.

*“Lack of support for pre-school teachers by the competent bodies in case they need information and help to deal with problems that may arise”.*

“In order to be properly implemented (meaning inclusive education), the Ministry and the Institute of Pedagogical Policy must have a clear view and support for inclusive education and support kindergartens in any way needed”.

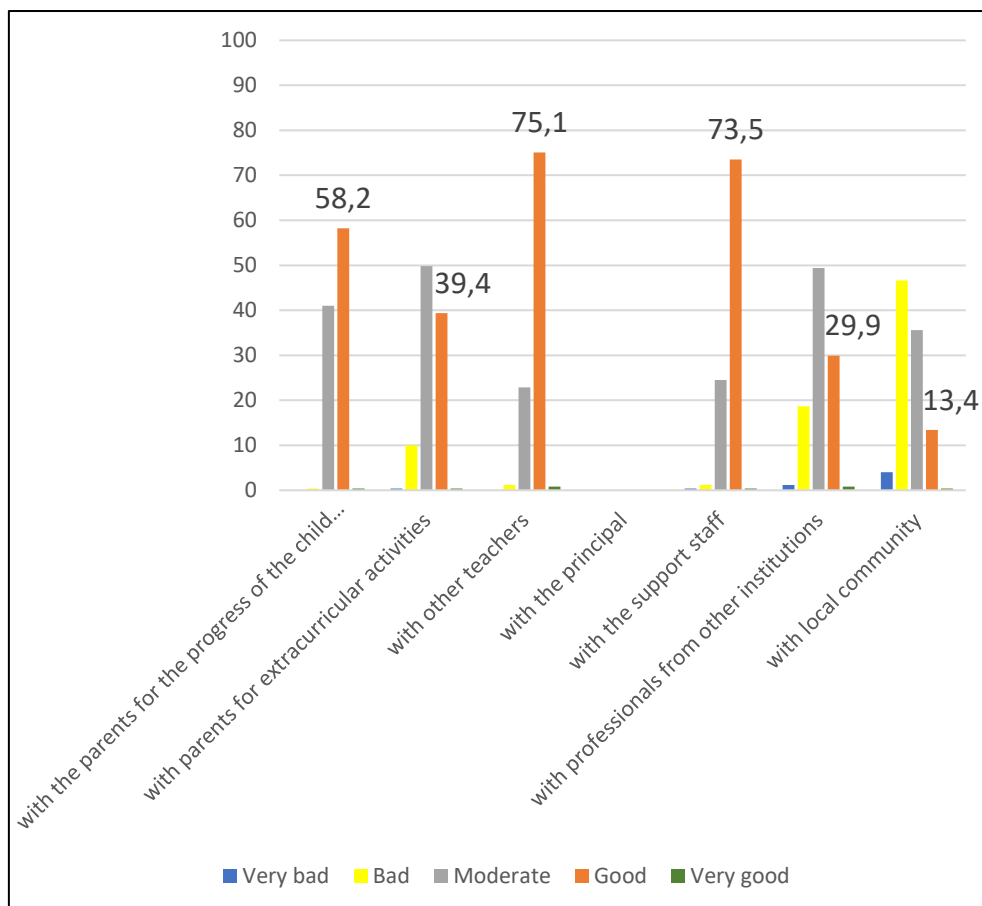
Pre-school teachers also consider the distribution of resources as a challenge. The lack of emphasis on the diffusion of resources towards inclusive education makes schools captive to the implementation of inclusive education. At the same time, the undocumented allocation of resources prevents children from vulnerable groups to participate in inclusive education.

“At the local level, the main challenge is the lack of flexibility in the allocation of resources. The way schools are organized at the local level needs to be reviewed in order to be in line with the overall vision of implementing inclusion”.

“Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive and clear legislation, strategy and allocation of funds for inclusive education. Access to inclusive education for Roma children, refugees, asylum seekers and children with SEN / disability is limited”.

Additional challenges pointed out by the teachers refer to the large number of children in the classroom, fear of trying new approaches as well as a lack of common understanding of inclusive education.

FIGURE 1



Cooperation

In terms of their cooperation (Figure 1), pre-school teachers consider that they cooperate well with the principal (82.2%), the other kindergarten teachers (75.1%), the support staff (73.5%), as well as with the parents for the progress of the child (especially those who face more difficulties) (58.2%). The participants stated that they cooperate moderately with the parents for extracurricular activities (49.8%), with representatives and professionals of other

institutions (support centers, medical staff) (49.4%) and a high percentage for the response moderate cooperation also gathers. working with parents on the child's progress (especially those with more difficulties) (41%). It is worth noting that kindergarten teachers talk about poor cooperation with the local community (46.6%). At the same time, we observe very low percentages in terms of cooperation of kindergarten teachers with those we mentioned for the options “very bad” and “very good” cooperation.

## DISCUSSION

The findings show that participants associate inclusive education with the basic principles of a democratically structured society, as well as with fundamental human rights and equity. This equity refers to equal opportunities for education for every child, excluding no one and respecting diversity. Inclusive education, according to the participants, includes children from vulnerable groups into the educational routine, who now feel familiar with the school environment, as lessons are taught in the same classroom as their peers. Children from vulnerable groups are not separated from children of normal development. On the contrary, these children coexist and communicate with each other. These findings are consistent with what is reported in the international literature on the core values of inclusion, equity, respect for diversity, combating discrimination and exclusion. (Artiles et al., 2011; Mitchell, 2017; UNESCO, 2015).

Inclusive education is a cross-border objective, as it is one of the main pillars of the European vision for education. Greece, like many other European countries, as the teachers surveyed point out, is making significant efforts to make inclusion a key component of the everyday educational work produced. What emerges from the responses to both rounds of the Delphi analysis is that in recent decades inclusive education has been high on the agenda of educational reforms in most European countries and there is a clear attitude towards the quality of education that inclusion offers and the benefits for all (students, teachers, support staff, family and society in general). The other principles mentioned by the survey participants in their approaches and considered by them to be an essential ingredient for the successful implementation of inclusive education include good cooperation, the development of a programme adapted to the needs of all children and the adequacy of teacher training. What is emphasized by almost all participants in the quantitative and qualitative research is that the key principle for implementing inclusive education is collaboration, both at the school level, i.e., between teachers and support staff, and between the school and the students' families. It is also noted that the teacher must prepare a programme and materials that are adapted to the needs of all children, offering benefits in terms of learning. In addition, staff (teachers and other professionals involved) must be adequately trained to meet the challenges of everyday school life in the context of inclusive education. Many participants referred to the State (especially the Ministry of Education), emphasising the support that the Ministry of Education should provide to kindergarten teachers in order to fully fulfil the vision of inclusive education. Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that a change of mindset is needed in a broader context, setting aside approaches that have been entrenched for years. Teachers also raise the issue, according to them, of the lack of strategies for involving parents in the issues under discussion that concern their children.

An important point to note is the distinction between the term “integration” and “inclusion”. According to the participants, through integration, the student has to make an effort and adapt to the educational routine. Rather, through inclusion, there is a total, so to speak, modification of the educational approach, encouraging the student to maintain his/her difference without deviating from the personal development (on a broader level) he/she has

chosen. In other words, the basis is a change in the character of the educational system, not in the student's daily life. This differentiation also refers to the findings of the international literature (Lee & Janta, 2020). Inclusive education seems to be of particular interest to the teachers who participated in the research, it is posed by many as the ideal approach, however, in many cases we observe that there are barriers to its implementation. Delphi survey participants agreed on the “most important challenges in implementing inclusive education”. The key word, according to them, is changing educational policies, practices and attitudes, and building consensus through a long-term process of innovative actions. Emphasis was placed on the analysis of the concepts, practices and structures that need to change as well as the changes that need to be made in this multi-level process. Among the challenges, priority was given to changing attitudes of professionals and families, insufficient training of professionals, lack of pedagogical strategies and appropriate training materials, lack of action plans for implementation, lack of adequate resources and lack of good leadership at school level.

The main obstacle to the implementation of inclusive education, highlighted by the majority of the participants in the quantitative and qualitative research, is the negative attitude of teachers and other stakeholders in the educational community. In particular, the negative attitude of teachers towards special educators in their classroom in order to help children who need support is mentioned. Through the interviews it becomes clear that there are many teachers who underestimate inclusive education, some do not accept it and some are opposed to it. This issue, as the research participants point out to us, is also linked to the fact that there are many teachers who develop a “hostile” attitude towards special educators who enter their classroom, do not cooperate with them and often blame them for not producing the educational work smoothly, as they hinder the process that the classroom teacher usually follows. The international literature shows that in the findings of the respective studies there is a wide variation in teachers' tendencies towards inclusive education. The trends range from conflicting and restrictive perceptions/beliefs of teachers about inclusive education (Fyssa et al., 2014), to moderately positive (Wu-Ying & Chang-Ming, 2012) and to a more positive attitude (Dias & Cadime, 2016; Ghergut, 2010).

Regarding the lack of education, and in some cases lack of training, on issues related to inclusive education, teachers focused on the fact that there is often a shortage at the undergraduate level. Many of the curricula are perceived as not focusing on inclusive education and its practical application. At the same time, a large proportion of the participating kindergarten teachers state that training related to inclusive education is offered to a small extent, and those that are offered insist on theory but do not show teachers how to implement it - i.e., the practical part is again listed as inclusive education. Regarding the lack of tools and educational materials for the implementation of inclusive education, kindergarten teachers who support this approach focus their view on the fact that in many cases, with the change of teaching staff almost every year, there is a lack of basic educational materials for children - which is necessary, as it is perceived, for the implementation of inclusive education. There is also the question of the teacher's self-direction in order to create the necessary material himself, as it may either not be provided by the structure at all, or it may be provided late. Another barrier for the kindergarten teachers who participated in the research is the lack of support. The lack of support was identified by the kindergarten teachers both in person and in the overall idea - the overall narrative - of implementing inclusive education. Essentially, self-help-support is approached as a tool to deal with any problems, as well as a prerequisite for the smooth implementation of inclusive education.

Other barriers mentioned by participants to implementing inclusion included fear of something new, large numbers of pupils in the classroom, lack of a common understanding and culture, the curriculum, which is considered inaccessible by some pupils, lack of appropriate knowledge/skills by teachers and lack of practical implementation, the gap between legislation

and policies in place, and lack of reasonable accommodation, which means appropriate modifications and adjustments to both the curriculum and the classroom. The main barriers to the implementation of inclusion in practice, as findings of the present study, are also mentioned in the international literature (Fyssa & Vlachou, 2015; Ghergut, 2010).

## CONCLUSIONS

In the context of a democratic and non-discriminatory society, that respects the human rights, inclusive education aims at quality education for all learners, with equal opportunities for access, participation, learning and achievement. Inclusive education is one of the main pillars of the European vision for education and there is a clear attitude towards the quality of education offered by inclusion and the benefits for all (learners, teachers, support staff, family and society at large).

The findings indicate that the basic principles for implementing inclusive education into practice include, among others, cooperation both at school level and between the school and students' families, the development of an inclusive and flexible curriculum for all students, adequate training of teachers on inclusion issues, materials adapted to the diversity of students' needs, and a change of mindset in a broader context, setting aside approaches that have been entrenched for years. Regarding the main challenges in implementing inclusive education, the key word, according to the findings, is changing educational policies, practices and attitudes and building consensus through a long-term process of innovative actions. Emphasis was placed on the analysis of the concepts, practices and structures that need to change, as well as the changes that need to be made in this multi-level process. Among the challenges, priority was given to changing attitudes of professionals and families, insufficient training of professionals, lack of pedagogical strategies and appropriate training materials, lack of action plans for implementation, lack of adequate resources and lack of good leadership at school level.

Although inclusive education is high on the agenda of educational reforms in most European countries, including Greece, and much progress has been made over the last 30 years, there are still some persistent challenges and areas for further development in the process towards inclusive education. Inclusion requires a significant change of mindset and a process of systemic reform and coordinated action at various levels, such as legal, political, organizational, pedagogical, educational, etc. Action to transform the education system to meet the academic and social learning needs of all learners.

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