



The Effects of the Economic Crisis in the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Contemporary Greek Schools

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Abstract

In times of crisis and socio political turbulence it has been observed that the sector of education accepts important neglect. Modern societies focus more on economic profit and they invest in this, without seriously taking into consideration the humanitarian and real social needs. Due to rapid social changes, it has become more important than ever to promote access to education in Greece, which in fact, has already been delayed. Individuals with special educational needs as much as those individuals of a different cultural background have the need of education and social balance, as mentioned in the human rights atlas. Having reviewed the bibliography we have come to the conclusion that no sufficient research has been conducted in Greece on the effects of the economic crisis concerning access and inclusion into education, giving rise to this particular study.

Keywords: Special education, Inclusion, Special educational needs.

Introduction

Modern Greek society is characterized by multicultural elements, however, individuals with “different” characteristics face prejudice on a daily basis either coming from institutions or school authorities or society as a whole. In the last three decades, Greece along with Italy and Spain, constitute a pole of attraction for many immigrants coming from many different countries. Greece’s geographical location in combination with political stability and economic factors (up until these were disrupted by the economic crisis), especially after the country became a member of the European Union constituted the major factors of attraction to Greece¹. However, the implementation of access to education has not been put into practice resulting in illiteracy and social insufficiency².

The increase of the immigration wave and the dynamics of the age of immigrants inevitably influenced the composition of the schools’ population. As seen in the statistical evidence of IPODE, during the academic years 2002-2009 there was a distinct increasing tendency of exclusion, while the proportion of immigrant students from the total number of students as a whole, amounted to the 9, 3%, in the academic year 2008-2009 from 6, 7% from the academic year 2002-2003³.

On an educational level, individuals with special educational needs and the multicultural “puzzle” are reflected in the classroom. The social skills they may have possibly acquired in their country of origin are no longer useful in their ‘new environment’. Many attempts have been made and are still being made so as school and education to be a place through which values and practices with the aim of eradicating

inequalities, creating independent individuals who will have equal opportunities in society, are promoted⁴.

According to Fotopoulos⁵, it is quite evident that educational policy is consistent with the above mentioned effort. However, the transition from one educational standard to another is not something which can be done from one day to another as it requires the effort from all institutions and authorities involved in the educational process. Inclusion plays an important role in the smooth functioning of society. But to perceive and understand inclusion as a whole, one has to understand the conceptual meaning of the idea of inclusion, the history and the concepts used in parallel with this. The purpose of this study is to highlight the impact of the economic crisis in the management of education policy concerning inclusion. In particular, we were puzzled at how the political decisions in times of crisis, take into account the fields of education or ignore it completely. The implementation of the ‘vision’ of inclusive education with the wider sense of the term, on the level of diversity and the subsequent relationships governing the application of the term in Special Education.

The effect of the economic crisis in the Greek educational system

The recent financial crisis in Greece comes to affect among other things, education, limiting the prospect for a better future that could be shaped by today's youth. Especially in modern times there is a tendency, according to Ftiaka⁴, to build a tolerant and democratic, personalized education aimed at all (inclusive education), ensuring equal opportunities and equal rights, both educational and professional, and gives each one of

us the ability to overcome weaknesses and to cultivate our positive points. Articles, in the daily press 'Proto Thema'⁶ for example, present students fainting in Greek schools from malnutrition and children who do not have the necessary stationery for their education needs as a common phenomenon. Undermining diversity, the rejection of individuals with special educational needs, psychiatric illnesses and other respective groups is a consequence of the economic crisis, subsequently, having a negative effect on the education of individuals with special educational needs.

Broadcasts on the BBC transmitting pictures of handicapped individuals being kept in wooden crates because of staff shortages in Pyrgos Ilias and other similar images do not stop there.

According to Ftiaka⁴ the current educational policy plays a major role in the functioning of practical education. Although as stated among others Argiriad is and Nikolidakis⁷ suggest that education needs to maintain a stable policy and discard an inclusive-holistic approach. One of the biggest questions which arise not only in the scientific field but the educational field and society as well is whether knowledge is equally transmitted in the same way to children with special needs as to typically developing children. The segregation of children with regard to their particular special needs might have been effective under certain circumstances and with the suitable means and materials for the achievement of a complete education.

From the above mentioned, regardless of the economic crisis, one can see that the Greek educational system is in need of total reconstruction. Especially when the economic crisis plagues the Greek family and society as a whole, putting a distance between the young and education and making students and teachers put all the efforts into the fight for survival. Reviewing the bibliography, one realises that there is a serious lack in studies concerning the periods of crises and their role in the respective educational system, even more so in the Greek language. Such a lack is clearly justified in both Greece and Cyprus in view of the lack of corresponding phenomena in the immediate past.

According to Fotopoulos⁵, the fiscal crisis, the deep recession, rising unemployment, widening imbalance between capital and labor forces constitute a particularly adverse context for the flourishing of sustainable and socially just policies resulting in further heightening of inequalities in education and society. Educational mechanisms are not left unscathed by the structural crisis affecting the whole of Europe.

On the contrary, unable to hold back the creation of new categories of youth being socially excluded along with those who violently marginalized, there is a new term that describes this phenomenon that exists in Europe at least since 2008 is called NEETS. Neets is translated to: young people not in employment, education and training, as reported by the European Monitoring Centre on Change and is a modern form

of social disadvantage that is expected to intensify in the coming years considerably. This situation creates a "domino effect" in other European countries as well, as suggested by Robinson⁸ as the economy is becoming increasingly unstable. That alone sounded the alarm in the global educational community in order to shield educational systems against such phenomena arising in the future. In Greece, there is no such "shield" since there is complete political exclusion and permanent electoral processes. "There are no funds in order to feed hospital patients," says a recent report of the Director of the Leros psychiatric hospital "or to feed students in schools but there is economic sufficiency for continuous electoral processes". As claimed by Robinson⁸, educational systems were formed to serve the needs of industry and were constructed to its standards. So, schools, factories and prisons have about the same operating mode. Even the school itself that is considered the cornerstone of any educational system is not a priority in the Greek educational policy. Whatever shapes human souls and school is considered one of the basic components of European pedagogical theories along with major studies of educational psychology and school architecture that have led to interesting proposals. The uniqueness of each school lies in future societies and when it does not function sufficiently the fundamental social chain is disrupted. Today, as Ftiaka⁴ mentions, the expectations of young people regarding their education, is focused on modern and interesting technology, the Media and to meet the needs for adaptation to a multicultural environment. At the same time, the educational system remains as it was before, quite drab and traditional and often unable to meet the modern needs⁹.

The spectrum of multilateral applications of inclusion in education: Inclusion as part of the pedagogical process has come into the spotlight over the past decades, initially in its bid to include disabled children in the mainstream school system, but with the ultimate purpose of changing attitudes and way of thinking in educational mentality and teachers aiming at social pedagogy. In the bibliography, terms such as 'inclusion' (the act of including) and 'inclusion' (the act of inclusion into a whole) are met but mentioning the two terms have proven to be confusing since their boundaries in definition are not clear cut¹⁰ and with reference to the way the terms were used up to 1994, in the Declaration of Salamanka, "Pedagogy for the Disabled", Hence forth, 'special needs' does not define the disabled but personal and cultural differences as well⁹.

From now on inclusion refers to the needs of all children, including any kind of differences in language, racial and cultural characteristics which are elements which fall under the heading of "Special". This is where Inclusive Education comes to replace access to education through a system of rights and acceptance of Inclusive Education is the means and not the end of social inclusion.

For the implementation of Inclusive Education according to Vlachou¹⁰, there should be: i. A teacher with the relevant training-qualifications to teach those children who show

problems in behavior and those who have learning difficulties. ii. Teacher aids should be available to provide services when needed, iii. The availability of suitable building structures, iv. Modern equipment.

The 'School for All' is built on principles of cooperative education of all authorities involved^{9,11}. Inclusion-Inclusion as seen in the relevant literature raises the issue of marginalisation, exclusion and isolation, in the base of the whole social system. Therefore, four basic elements of inclusion-inclusion arise, those being, cultural, regulatory, communicative and functional⁹. Through this, an effort to review the issue of inclusion-inclusion should be made with reference to its social and cultural dimensions and the inclusion-inclusion of immigrants. The attitude and bias of societies against anything foreign and different is something which has existed since antiquity. In contemporary societies these attitudes are formed at a young age and are maintained through adulthood. Evidently, when a person emigrates to a foreign country his cultural characteristics, values and ideals which may not correspond to the "new" country's characteristics and mentality, 'emigrate' with him. Language is a vital tool in an immigrant's inclusion-inclusion, for one's smooth transition into society, something which consequently helps in the development of civilisation. This gives one the ability to participate in the whole spectrum of society as a whole, as an independent individual and a part of this whole. Thus, taking part in education, health and social provision in general¹². Societies nowadays have an intercultural character and this means that conditions must exist for the smooth inclusion of these features into societies through cultural institutions and social cohesion. As mentioned by Tsinarelis¹³, there should be acceptance, within an already existing condition of a person with different social, biological and economic characteristics and providing all kinds of assistance for the acquisition of roles with in societies. Regarding parents of foreigners and repatriates have many difficulties in communicating with teachers because of the language barrier and for this reason avoid being in communication with them but this leads to them having difficulty in providing learning support and aid for their children in certain subjects. Prevention programs are a necessity in the school for the promotion of mental health and mental resilience of the members of the school community¹⁴. These programs are implemented at a) primary prevention, b) secondary levels of prevention or early intervention, c) at a third level prevention and d) systemic (holistic) intervention¹⁵.

According to consolidate reports 2009 concerning Social Policy and Social Inclusion there are still many drawbacks concerning, employment, the education of the unemployed and the early school leaving of immigrants. Weight on the action needed to be taken for a proper inclusion policy and measures to be taken against discrimination, aiming at long-term market inclusion of marginalized work. Many seem to be the obstacles that prevent the creation of a proper Inclusion Policy, one of these being the role played by medicalization. According to Argyriadis and

Argyriadi¹⁶, medicalisation has contributed to strengthening of exclusion. This is because anything that is not considered normal, is considered pathologic and excluded, which led to further medicalisation according to culture characterisation as seen with foreigners and homosexuals, this is achieved in the labelling of characteristics of anything different.

Finally, it would be useful if we take a look at the issue concerning Europe. The 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) in 2008 states: "inclusive education is an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all, while demonstrating respect for diversity and the different needs and abilities, the characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination"¹⁷.

In an article Leeman¹⁸, on the situation in the Netherlands, says that two educational models coexist. One that sets targets with technical characteristics and predictable results and the other considers education as a process of direct contact and communication between students and teachers. From this second model, issues regarding culture, diversity and respect emerge playing a major role in education. It is also mentioned that the role of the teacher is very definitive in this effort. More specifically, the teacher should be in the position to perceive the differences in culture and have ethical values such as justice and fairness so as to be able to 'possess' the ethical dimensions of education. Education as a means of inclusion is recognised by many countries, but very few have embraced a policy of fundamental practices to address social exclusion. Measures have been introduced for the creation of high quality standards, tackling early leaving of school and improve structures for access to education for specific groups of individuals, according to the 2009 consolidated report on social protection and social inclusion.

Inclusion into Special Education

For there to be a theory with reference to inclusion into special education, there has to be a conceptual approach of the term as to define the term 'disabled' and 'special education'¹⁹. The World Health Organisation introduces a system of classification according to rheumatologist P. Wood, in this classification the term disadvantage is used to define any loss of substance, alteration of a structure or psychological, physiological or anatomical function 'disability' corresponds to each partial or total incapacitation (result of the defect) in the ability to perform an activity in a certain way or within limits considered normal for a human being "and the defect as the result of inability to limit the physiological role of the individual"¹⁰. A pedagogical approach considers Special Education an integral part of education. A typical definition of Special Education in Greece is that of Imvrioti⁹ as the science that takes care of the education, the teaching and welfare of all children whose physical and mental development are incessantly hindered by factors both individual and social: i. Weakness regarding the senses (blind or

visually impaired children, deaf or hard of hearing children and the deaf and dumb), ii. Stunted development of the central nervous system (severely or mildly retarded children), iii. Neuropathic and Psychopathic illnesses, physical illnesses, disabilities and defects related to the environment.

Legislation in Greece and Cyprus, places emphasis on the efforts to ensure the all-round development of a child with special needs, in all of the spectrum of its developmental stages and all levels of education with the aim of making the individual an independent and productive member of society, depending on his/her abilities. Many definitions have been given to the term 'disabled' and 'special education' which unfortunately cannot be mentioned in this paper. The conclusion reached though, is that there is no clear definition given that could be the basis for further formulation and implementation of school inclusion and society.

However, clearly special educational needs are directly related to social perceptions and the general possibility of such absorbance features and icap-from different societies. Inclusion turned out to be the link between general and special education, which for several decades were separated by a big gap. In 1978 there was a moment in time when things in the field of education began to evolve under a different light, following the findings of a commission of inquiry in England with President M. Warnock, for people with special educational needs. These findings suggested that all individuals must have equal opportunities in personal development and completion. For the first time taboos were broken and prejudices were discarded in the education of 'special' and 'normal' children. Curricula should be common for all students regardless of differences (Warnock Report)⁹. As Zoniou-Sideris suggests⁹ that "special schools remain "closed" "they are unable to find outlets and break the barriers of prejudice". Special schools do not show diverse composition corresponding to the reality of the society; they choose the student population based on their specific characteristics resulting in the exclusion of students and their families therefore resulting in the "exclusion" of special schools themselves.

As shown in the relevant literature, the efforts to implement inclusion, through institutionalized tools, did not yield fruit and that is because inclusion involves the whole of society. If there is no theoretical frame work in order to change educational ideology, inclusion cannot take form. School is just a part of inclusion along with the family play a major role, in the successful process. Society on the other hand comes to complete this process, by having direct contact with the schools and the relevant institutions making it a collective effort. In practice the process of inclusion, is profitable for everyone involved, it creates a security shield, in which stereotypical perceptions are done away with and individuals disabled or not, develop skills and become sociable. Parent son the other hand, feel that social balance and justice exist and that inclusion requires them to be part of the process²⁰.

Today we could say that the situation is not in the early stages, steps have been made, but we still need a long way to go for work to begin to be effectively put in practice. "The trend at the moment in various Member States of the European Union is to fit children with special educational needs in main stream schools, providing teachers with various forms of support in terms of personnel, materials and equipment²¹.

Conclusion

Thoughts and emotions are mixed, if one attempts to examine the issue of inclusion. This is because while Inclusion is imagined as something ideal, in practice many difficulties and obstacles arise. In mainstream schools, it is an effort which has caused many debates, disputes and tension, as in recent years concerns have grown in special and general education²². Consideration should be given to the theoretical frame work of inclusion, so that students are educated according to their abilities. In societies there is usually a connection made between students with special educational needs to have severe forms of inadequacy to be educated. The improvement of social reaction according to social standards as mentioned by Vlachou, Didaskalou & Papananou², have helped identify the various pathologies of the body and people with special educational needs.

This movement has helped in decision making so that people with special educational needs can enjoy social acceptance along with its goods. In Greek reality, the subject of inclusion was implemented through the "transfusion of European texts"¹¹ and for that reason very slow steps were made. Each country should meet the requirements so that there are resources available for these groups of the population.

The issue raised many questions concerning inclusion and inclusion, and highlights the need for a redefinition of the theoretical principles and content of inclusion⁹. Unfortunately, Social Policy has not managed to produce a different approach to the issue, it has failed to find the dividing lines, so that means that education remains in its conventional form without any alternative methods.

In closure, one needs to think about our behavior and personal stance, through which one can achieve to have respect for different cultures and individual differences of each individual. We need to strengthen and reinforce our support towards those with differences to those of ours, as it seems to play an important role in the formation and results of social inclusion policy.

The feelings of solidarity and a collective effort are those which will create a balance between individual differences and the way to stop strengthening these weaknesses. We need to turn our attention to the content and essence of inclusion so that it becomes the medium through which we will succeed in having a free society.

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