



Inclusion in Contemporary Educational Practice: A Comprehensive Analysis of a Novel Pedagogical Philosophy

Dimitrios Karakoulas¹, Eirini Karagianni²

¹MEd, PhD Candidate, National Technical University of Athens

²MSc, University of West Attica

Abstract: The subject of this essay is to elucidate a novel pedagogical philosophy, namely, inclusion, and to delineate the conditions that may foster the development of a contemporary inclusive educational environment. Implementing the principles and methodologies intrinsic to inclusive education is a complex endeavor, attainable only through the concerted action of specific determinants. One salient prerequisite that could significantly contribute to this objective is the engaged involvement of educators, students, and the community at large in cultivating an ethos of inclusivity. Another contributing factor that could have a positive impact is the establishment and adherence to apposite policies targeting the professional development and training of educational staff with respect to the methods employed in their pedagogical practice. Finally, the strategic utilization of contemporary research findings and insights gleaned from reflective processes could serve as an additional facilitative component in the realization of an inclusive educational paradigm.

Key-words: educational policy, inclusive education, inclusive schools.

I. Introduction

This paper endeavors to explore the notion of inclusive education and to examine the factors that may foster the emergence of inclusive schools. The policy of inclusion encapsulates a relatively recent imperative emanating from the global educational and scientific community, articulated in the quest for more efficacious education in a period characterized by escalating demands (Erten & Savage, 2012). The inclusive school is predicated on the assimilation of all students into the educational continuum without constraints and serves as a substantial enabler for both special and intercultural education (Αγγελίδης, 2011). The objective of this essay, consequently, is to accentuate the pivotal elements that may galvanize the advancement of inclusive education. Fundamental preconditions encompass the active participation of educators, students, and the broader community in shaping school policies and decision-making, coupled with the existence of political resolve to underscore the salience of inclusive pedagogical practices. Moreover, it is of paramount importance to judiciously leverage the insights yielded from pertinent research and reflection, thereby contributing to the construction of a robust and responsive inclusive educational framework.

According to Αγγελίδης (2011), the concept of inclusion is principally associated with individuals identified with special educational needs, underscoring a comprehensive array of practices aimed at their assimilation into general education school environments. Concurrently, inclusion extends to encompass individuals exhibiting diverse characteristics across cultural, linguistic, national, and religious dimensions (Αβραμίδου, 2011).

Inclusive education stands distinct from other educational models, with its core emphasis on eradicating the exclusion and marginalization of individuals. Its ultimate objective is to dismantle social inequality, which

obstructs the participation and learning of individuals irrespective of their disabilities, gender, or socio-economic backgrounds (Αβραμίδου, 2011). Consequently, the pursuit of an inclusive approach represents a significant challenge, extending beyond mere pedagogy and striking at the core of societal values and practices (Acedo, Ferrer, & Pamies, 2009). As a form of educational philosophy, inclusion strives to acknowledge individuals with special educational needs as vital and integrated members of the school community (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2010). The presence of a positive approach, the creation of personalized programs, collaboration, and the involvement of general and special education teachers can achieve the participation of individuals with special needs, thereby preventing their marginalization (Στασινός, 2013).

II. Educators and Involved Parties

The advancement of inclusive education necessitates the establishment of a comprehensive set of practices and policies that endorse equal opportunity provision and acceptance of diversity. Implementing this paradigm equates to providing equal opportunities across the entire student population (Αγγελίδης, 2011). This approach could contribute to the democratization of education as a whole, furthering principles such as cooperation, solidarity, and active participation.

The educators serve as the principal agents involved in education, and their role today is highly significant, not merely as transmitters of knowledge but more so as a counselors and facilitators of learning. This reflects the contemporary trend towards student-centered schooling. Consequently, the role of the educators has expanded, and their main mission is advisory and guiding, allowing students the latitude to seek knowledge independently and participate actively in the educational process. Thus, students do not merely acquire knowledge from the educators, but collaborate with them throughout their learning journey (Tomlinson, 2014).

Educators constitute the type of superior factor essential for the creation of inclusive schools and their efficacy. Inclusion results from the collaboration of educators within the general school unit, forging a society for all (Cassimos, Polychronopoulou, Tripsianis, & Syriopoulou-Delli, 2013). Educators' positive perceptions of the inclusive approach are a significant element in achieving fostering inclusive schools (Cassady, 2011). The philosophical consideration of inclusion stems from the generation of positive perceptions by educators in promoting the acceptance of students with special educational needs. The educational staff is responsible for cultivating these positive perceptions and attitudes within the school community, leadership, and students to foster an improved school climate. Achieving inclusion necessitates not only educational training, but also beliefs about diversity (Florian, 2010).

The domain of educational policy must promote the creation of a school environment for all individuals, and delineate its design in such a manner that supports the accommodation of diversity. The comprehensive suite of policies demands the encouragement of participation by educators, students, and the local community to avoid the marginalization of individuals. Concurrently, the School Curricula must incorporate practices that respect diversity, so that educators are effectively guided and utilize appropriate materials that will foster the activation and participation of all students (Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). The participation of the entire student body, regardless of special needs, in the learning process sets as a precondition the necessary knowledge and abilities of educators to organize an educational process of alternative forms (Angelides & Avraamidou, 2010).

In pursuit of achieving inclusive education, it is imperative for educational personnel to employ contemporary pedagogical methods such as collaborative group work, inquiry-based learning, museum pedagogy, the use of visual techniques, and the incorporation of their experiential knowledge. Educational approaches must be responsive to the diverse needs of students, necessitating a redefinition of educational policies geared towards the establishment of school units with a democratic framework (Sorriano & Staff, 2014).

Furthermore, educational personnel must create a collaborative network among themselves and with involved educational bodies, students, and the community, for the dissemination of information, enrichment of knowledge, and the achievement of learning effectiveness. For the implementation of inclusion, the environment must be flexible, ensuring accessibility for all students (Στασινός, 2013). Significant prerequisites include the engagement and cooperation of all educators in general and special education, parents, educational

entities, students, and educational leaders. Factors contributing to inclusion encompass the training and professional development of educators, the creation of a positive school climate, the eradication of negative perceptions, the necessary material resources, and parental contribution (Χριστοφοράκη, 2008).

Simultaneously, the involvement and perceptions of students within the context of inclusive education are vital. Research findings demonstrate the positive outcomes in the realm of emotional and academic development of the student population co-educated with peers with special educational needs (Ζώνιου-Σιδέρη, 2010). Thus, it appears that the positive perceptions of involved members of the school class, including the students themselves, contribute to the establishment of inclusive educational units.

According to Ryan & Gottfried (2012), the role of the school unit's leadership is pivotal, as it bears the responsibility for promoting a positive school climate among the teaching and student body. The principal must provide room for action to the educators for taking initiatives, regardless of the content of the School Curriculum. Concurrently, the school's leadership has the capacity to offer encouragement for the realization of a set of practices that allow co-teaching between educators of special and general education (Αγγελίδης, 2011). The most salient elements of inclusive education are directed towards the provision of equal opportunities, the fostering of positive perceptions among members, the further education and adequacy of the training of educators, and the application of a student-centered teaching method (Παπάνης, Γαβρίμης & Βίκη, 2011).

The implementation of inclusive education is effective when the educational staff operates collectively rather than individually. The creation of collaboration among general and special education teachers, students, the familial environment, other stakeholders, and the distribution of leadership minimizes the isolation of students, enhancing their integration (Liasidou, 2012). It is imperative for the educational staff to create a network of collaboration among members, one that is implemented in the school environment, but also in the broader community. This collaboration should involve students, parents, and educational entities to foster the development of inclusion and improve educational units (Hsien, Brown, & Bortoli, 2009).

III. School leadership and inclusive culture

The role played by the leadership of each educational unit is of particular significance, as research findings suggest that it has the ability to secure an educational environment of equal opportunities and effectiveness (Αγγελίδης, Αντωνίου, & Χαραλάμπους, 2009). The management of the school unit serves as the architect of inclusion, fostering the development of goals and transmitting to the educators the collective endeavor of an inclusive approach. Concurrently, the school leader can advance the evolution and continuous training of the educators, reconstruct the school's structure, and organize its administrative mechanism. Adoption of only part, and not the entirety, of practices by educators is deemed inadequate, as the inclusive implementation is tied to the leadership's form of governance, its distribution, and the way it can be transformed into collective work involving the educational, student, and family audience. Inclusion presupposes the existence of a leader who performs the distribution of leadership responsibilities, listens to the educators, students, parents, and the community, in creating new ideas or in the decision-making process (Τσιγκάκου, 2016). The leader of the school unit is responsible for developing a culture directed towards inclusion. This type of inclusive culture must be exercised by the leader and have the necessary participation of the student population, the broader school unit, the educational staff, and the community.

Research studies have gathered the most significant obligations of a school leader who promotes the culture of inclusion within the school environment, and they are as follows:

- The development of an inclusive plan and vision that is reflected in the entirety of the leader's actions (Cardona, 2009).
- The school leader must recognize the efforts to achieve inclusive implementation and encourage them.
- The leader should be proactive in acquiring resources for the organization and maintenance of infrastructures.
- The leader must contribute to the process of differentiating the school organization according to the educational needs of the student population.
- The leader must set high and realistic goals, assessing the learning progress of the student population.

- The leader must manage appropriately the various positions supported by the involved stakeholders, which may constitute obstacles to the implementation and realization of inclusive education.

What is more, significant areas where the leaders of the school unit can focus on the creation and improvement of inclusive schools include the implementation of democratic practices reflecting the diverse beliefs and views of the educational staff, and the restructuring through the creation of inclusion practices based on a comprehensive body of knowledge (Δάρρα, Υφαντή, Προκοσιάδου & Σαϊτης, 2010).

Regarding school leadership, various models of inclusive education have been created, such as the "Management of Inclusive and Special Education" that approaches the school organization as a kind of system. The creation of the school unit's culture can be carried out with the contribution of the school leader, through his or her actions (Αγγελίδης, 2009). The type of culture constitutes the foundation for creating practices with an inclusive direction, as it forms a society governed by safety, cooperation, and acceptance. The principles derived from the school culture serve as a guide for decision-making, selecting practices for the continuous development of all members of the school organization. The headmaster or the headmistress of the school unit can contribute to its development and convey these principles to the educational staff through collaborative processes. According to Κοντάκος (2016), the headmaster's or the headmistress' genuine interest, each educator's true care, and the involvement of the members participating in the school organization will help in the promotion and realization of inclusion. The components that will contribute to this development are the creation of organization, the development of organizational pedagogy, and the formation of an entity that is continuously learning.

IV. Exploring the Multifaceted Benefits of Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches

Through research studies, it has become evident that the practical implementation of inclusive education offers advantages on academic, economic, and social levels. Inclusion promotes the coexistence of students with or without special educational needs within the framework of the school community, preparing them for subsequent integration into the broader society, and preventing marginalization. Thus, typically developing members of the school class become sensitized to issues of diversity, accepting forms of disability and, correspondingly, the individuals who bear them, as equals (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012).

Individuals with special needs, when participating in the school environment, become accepted members of the social setting through interaction and mutual engagement. The aforementioned framework fosters the development of a whole set of positive attitudes and behaviors among students, instilling feelings of respect, collaboration, and understanding towards other members. Inclusive education can provide equal social and educational opportunities for all students. Research evidence substantiates the most significant benefit of inclusion, which pertains to granting access to the Curriculum for members with special educational needs, offering equality in learning and social interaction. Moreover, inclusion can eliminate marginalization, enhance the self-esteem level of individuals, achieve collaboration between general and special education teachers, provide continuous professional development for educational staff, and promote diversity and acceptance thereof (Χρηστάκης, 2014).

V. Research and reflection

The third condition, considered particularly significant for the development of more inclusive schools today, is the emphasis on the potential advantages of research and reflection. These two elements are likely to provide stakeholders involved in education with valuable resources and information concerning the practices of inclusion and effective ways to develop them. Currently, the research process on topics related to special education and intercultural education is extensive. More specifically, in relation to issues pertaining to inclusive education, there now exists substantial research activity examining various aspects of this subject, which can significantly contribute to knowledge and the enhancement of educational practices.

Contemporary research on inclusion explores the views and attitudes of educators towards new pedagogical trends and inclusive practices, as well as students' perceptions of the significance of inclusion and

the degree to which it is achieved today. Additionally, new strategies that are suitable and effective for promoting inclusive schooling are investigated, along with the difficulties encountered in this endeavor, and the role of educators, peers, and other stakeholders. In sum, contemporary research seeks to cover all aspects of the subject, so that it becomes understood in all its manifestations, something that will lead to a more effective implementation of the inclusive vision.

Research studies highlight that the School Curriculum is inflexible concerning its content and objectives, contributing to the cultivation of forms of segregation rather than inclusion (Ζώνιου-Σιδέρη, 2010). Managing a student population characterized by diversity requires a tailored Curriculum, which responds to its needs. Concurrently, the inclusive approach necessitates the restructuring of the educational system's structure, administration, and policies to appropriately manage diversity. Educators must provide learning opportunities daily to all members, creating working groups (Soriano & Staff, 2014).

The attitudes and perceptions of both educational staff and the familial environment have been proven through research evidence to influence the teaching process and the performance of members. The family environment's concern for the development of members with special educational needs within the school setting can affect the success of their learning and integration (Κατσαρού & Λιακοπούλου, 2014).

Another significant element, whose contribution is crucial in the promotion and development of inclusive schools, is reflection. Reflection refers to the assessment, through the completion of a plan, program, or process, of the degree to which the goals initially set have been achieved, with the purpose of revising them, correcting weaknesses, and enhancing the educational process (Καράμηνας, 2010). Reflection today constitutes a fundamental component of educators' self-evaluation, not only in inclusive education but in all forms of modern education, and indeed, it is a vital stage in the development of a teaching plan or program (Σουρτζή, Ιωακειμίδου, Βλάχος, Κουστοσπύρου & Χατζημυχαηλίδης, 2013).

In conclusion, both the existence of numerous studies and new data on the issues of inclusive education, as well as the particularly significant information provided to educators by reflective processes that can be implemented, are equally beneficial. They offer multiple advantages for the promotion of the principles and methods of inclusion in the contemporary school setting.

VI. Conclusions

In summary, inclusive education represents a novel pedagogical trend that is being advanced for implementation in general education settings, within classrooms that encompass students with diverse educational needs. Both special education and intercultural education constitute two domains that presently adopt the principles of inclusion. These efforts aim to provide equal learning opportunities for all children, irrespective of their unique educational needs and individual characteristics.

The concept of inclusive education delineates the provision of equal opportunities to all members of society, as they are integral parts of it. Developing inclusive schools constitutes a challenging and complex undertaking that can be achieved by cultivating specific conditions. Stakeholders in the school organization, including leadership, educational staff, students, the familial environment, and society, must partake in this effort toward inclusive implementation. School leadership is necessary to foster collaboration and solidarity, distribute school responsibilities, encourage the participation of all members, and cultivate an inclusive culture through various practices. The role of educators is pivotal, as it is essential for them to possess the necessary training and maintain positive perceptions of the inclusive approach. Their positive attitudes can be transmitted to the student body, with the aim of achieving this vision. The development of a broader culture whose content corresponds to the principles and objectives of inclusion is equally important. The educational staff and other involved members must collaborate and actively work towards the development of inclusive school organizations through the adoption of positive attitudes, training, and further education. Inclusive education offers many benefits, such as equality for all, the provision of equal opportunities, integration, and the elimination of the phenomenon of isolating individuals with special educational needs or different characteristics. Finally, research studies can substantiate and emphatically highlight the significance of the inclusive pedagogical approach with suggestions emerging from the exploration of this field.

Despite the fact that, on a theoretical level, the principles of inclusion are held in high regard, their implementation in practice constitutes a demanding, laborious, and complex task. This task requires the presence of specific favorable conditions, as well as the willingness and effort of all stakeholders involved in the education sector. Today, inclusive education is gaining increasing support in our country; however, many substantial steps still need to be taken to speak of its proper and effective implementation. The weaknesses are numerous, such as a lack of training and readiness among educators and administrators, the perpetuation of social exclusion phenomena within the school community and broader society, and the economic crisis, which significantly affects the field of education. Nonetheless, in addition to these deficiencies, there exist many positive prospects, such as the advancement of special education and intercultural education, the enrichment of existing knowledge with new insights from research activity, and the emergence of new educators who are increasingly receiving training in this field.

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