

***Including Students with Disabilities: Attitudes of Typically Developing Children
and of Parents of Children with and Without Special Educational Needs***

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Abstract

The present paper constitutes a literature review research, discussing issues of inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Inclusive education refers to the appropriate response to the diversity of students with disabilities, addressing their Special Educational Needs (SEN) as equal members and as stakeholders of the culture of the school learning community. These inclusive educational environments both influence and are subject to the dispositions of their addressees. The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes of the recipients of inclusive education towards the inclusion of preschoolers, of primary school aged students and of adolescents with disabilities. For this reason, the thirty (30) most recent (2000-2015) relevant empirical studies, at European and international level, are reviewed, investigating the related attitudes of Typically Developing (TD) children and of parents of children with and without SEN. Regardless of the student age, it is observed that parents of TD children and of children with mild SEN express conflicting relative attitudes. Moreover, parents of children with moderate and/ or severe disabilities and TD children by majority assess the present issue in a positive and in a negative way, respectively. Generally, an effect of demographic, socio-cultural and socio-economic parameters in the attitudes of the surveyed is noted. Several reasonable parental doubts are depicted, influencing the associated student views. In conclusion, the integration of students with SEN in mainstream educational settings is a field of expression of various and multifactorial attitudes. Lastly, the methodological limitations of the studies reviewed and future research proposals are set out.

Keywords: inclusion, students with disabilities, children's attitudes, parental attitudes

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Introduction

Nowadays, the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream settings constitutes a significant, realistic and opportune topic for discussion worldwide (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, & Van Houten, 2009; Nakken & Pijl, 2002). In principle, Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, and Petry (2013) define inclusion as the service and the appropriate support of students of a full range of skills and with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream classes. In that context, children are perceived as equal members of the school learning community (Pijl & Hamstra, 2005). Yet, inclusive education's specification requires a clarification between mere inclusion and integration (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). Thus, Takala and Ahl (2014) claim that substantial inclusive education involves the increase of student participation in the cultures and in the curriculum of mainstream schools, as well as the reduction of the associated restraining pressures.

Equally, the term SEN presupposes a separation between "normal" and "less normal" students; hence, it entails exclusion (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Reindal, 2010). In fact, Norwich (2008) argues that the given terminology impedes critical approaches of inclusion, continuing the culture on a separate special education. What's more, Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) assert that it implies a relative weakness of the trainees, being a language of sentimentalism and bias. On the contrary, substantive inclusive education refers to the receptive and respectful response to diversity as part of human rights, both influencing and being subject to the dispositions of its addressees with and without SEN (Miles & Singal, 2010). Such a cohabitation recommends an inclusive experience of all students (Lindsay, 2007). Yet, separated special schools have encouraged stereotypes, unawareness and a bilateral suspiciousness among individuals with and without disabilities (Polat, 2011). Therefore, in accordance with Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou (2011), they have no right of existence. Finally, the pursuit of an inclusive education necessarily implicates the removal of the provision, the policies and the practices already embedded to the educational structures fostering attitudes of exclusion (Slee, 2013). Consequently, the absence of an empirical study of the attitudes regarding the inclusive education of pupils with SEN on behalf of all its recipients (Hwang & Evans, 2011; Runswick-Cole, 2011) led to the necessity of a bibliographical summarization of the research results focused on its individual addressees.

Purpose of the study

The present paper aimed to investigate the attitudes of the recipients of inclusive education towards the inclusion of preschoolers, of primary school aged students and of adolescents with disabilities in mainstream educational settings. For this reason, the thirty (30) most recent (2000-2015) relevant empirical studies, conducted at European and international level, are reviewed, investigating the related attitudes of Typically Developing (TD) children and of parents of children with and without SEN. Summarizing the abovementioned research findings, an attempt will be made to draw conclusions concerning the attitudes of the surveyed towards inclusive education.

Method

Using the keywords of the title of the present paper in English, an online search was carried out, from May until July 2015, via the following databases: ERIC, MEDLINE, PsycARTICLES, PsychINFO, SocINDEX, Elsevier, Wiley, Taylor and Francis, and Springer. During this procedure, the initial about 6,000 results were limited to the final 30 studies, due to the search criteria of research papers published from the year 2000 and onwards, comprising empirical and measurable data.

Review of the literature

Attitudes of parents of TD children

By majority, inclusion is considered beneficial for both preschoolers with and without SEN (Rafferty & Griffin, 2005). In that regard, the parental acknowledgement that participation in inclusive classrooms supports developmental diversity's acceptance by TD preschool children has been observed (Seery, Davis, & Johnson, 2000). However, some parents express concerns that their children might develop undesirable behaviors (Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004). In addition, reservations are expressed about the adopted inclusive classroom practices (Tichenor, Heins, & Piechura-Couture, 2000), the staff qualifications' adequacy (Leyser & Kirk, 2004) and the appropriate guiding and supportive teaching resources' availability (Kalyva, Georgiadi, & Tsakiris, 2007). Moreover, the classrooms' size (Peck et al., 2004) and the school district's commitment in providing coordinated services of quality are highlighted (Tichenor et al., 2000).

Further parental concerns are depicted regarding the potential low interest, the expectations and the disappointment of TD children owing to an unequal distribution of studying and grading among pupils (Stahmer, Carter, Baker, & Miwa, 2003). Additionally, time management difficulties for disciplining or keeping up with children with SEN are noted (Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003). What's more, it has been observed that Greek parents who viewed positively their eventual personal interaction with a child with SEN were less positive to allow the same to their TD child (Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003). On the contrary, Kalyva et al. (2007) recorded broad positive corresponding attitudes. Lastly, it has been inferred that progressive student exposure to inclusive frameworks reduces parental concerns (Leyser & Kirk, 2004).

Influential factors

Contradictory findings exist respecting the effect of parents' age, gender and educational level on their attitudes (Kalyva et al., 2007; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003; Tichenor et al., 2000). Nevertheless, such stances are positively influenced by the parental experience with a child with SEN in class (Peck et al., 2004) and by the disabilities' severity (Rafferty & Griffin, 2005).

Attitudes of parents of children with SEN

Attitudes of parents of children with moderate and/ or severe disabilities

Parents of children with severe SEN express support and satisfaction for the outcomes of inclusive education, particularly for its social benefits (Gallagher et al., 2000; Mandell & Salzer, 2007). In particular, associated attitudes regarding pupils with Down syndrome (De Boer & Munde, 2014; Palmer, Fuller, Arora, & Nelson, 2001) and autism (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2014; Mandell & Salzer, 2007; Whitaker, 2007) are recorded. Likewise, gratification for TD children's behavioral modelling on their peers with SEN is observed (Gallagher et al., 2000; Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Nonetheless, following the admission to inclusive programs, parental reservations about the insufficient teachers' training (Whitaker, 2007) and concerns regarding students' social integration as well as academic progress are set forth (Palmer et al., 2001; Seery, Davis, & Johnson, 2000). Also, some parents worry that their children might become socially isolated (De Boer & Munde, 2014) and harass or be harassed either verbally or physically by their TD peers (Rafferty et al., 2001). Further concerns are recorded towards the qualitatively inadequate instruction, the possible teacher burnout (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2014; Whitaker, 2007) and the lack of support from the latter and from TD classmates' parents (Gallagher et al., 2000). Finally, doubts about student transportation's constraints and as to the likelihood of an interventional failure due to the respective student disabilities' severity are indicated (Palmer et al., 2001).

Attitudes of parents of children with mild cognitive deficits and/ or Learning Disabilities (LD)

Parents of pupils with mild and/ or moderate disabilities (e.g. LD, behavioral disorders and mild intellectual disabilities) support their children's inclusion in mainstream schools (Elkins, Van Kraayenoord, & Jobling, 2003; Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Corresponding parental satisfaction exists in reference to the benefits of preschool (Seery, Davis, & Johnson, 2000) and of primary school aged students (Rafferty et al., 2001). Conversely, parental concerns have been expressed with regard to the reintegration of pupils with LD in mainstream primary school classrooms (Runswick-Cole, 2008). In addition, similar stances have been recorded for including adolescents with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities in general upper secondary education (Eizein, 2009). In such cases, special education or partial inclusion settings have been supported (Hotulainen & Takala, 2014; Runswick-Cole, 2008).

Influential factors

Favorable attitudes towards inclusion are determined by parents' demographic, socio-cultural and socio-economic features, with a lead of younger, more educated and less affluent women (Runswick-Cole, 2008; Seery et al., 2000). Moreover, they are based on personal inclusive experiences (Elkins et al., 2003; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Palmer et al., 2001). Likewise, the family status of single parent families, as well as the small number of children are accordingly related (De Boer & Munde, 2014; Eizein, 2009; Gallagher et al., 2000). Furthermore, parents' attitudes are positively affected by the low severity of their child's diagnosis, the small student age and the satisfactory

current inclusive school placement (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2014; Mandell & Salzer, 2007; Whitaker, 2007).

Attitudes of TD children

A superficial acceptance rather than a reciprocal inclusive interaction of TD pupils with their classmates of multisensorial disabilities has been observed (Nikolarazi & De Reybekiel, 2001). Correspondingly, Ferguson (2008) concluded that the academic coexistence of TD students with children with motor disabilities in inclusive settings did not necessarily entail the integration of the latter. In fact, Marshall, Stojanovik, and Ralph (2002) recorded an “internal exclusion” in schools and a continuous tendency of labelling of children with mild SEN. Lastly, both De Boer, Pijl, Minnaert, and Post (2014) and Nikolarazi et al. (2005) deduced the innate and intense negative students’ attitudes regarding the inclusion of children beyond the presumed “normal range”.

Influential factors

Positive student attitudes are displayed in terms of including pupils with physical, rather than those with emotional, intellectual or multiple disabilities (Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009; Panagiotou, Evaggelinou, Doulkeridou, Mouratidou, & Koidou, 2011) or even with LD (Gasser, Malti, & Buholzer, 2014; Nepi, Fioravanti, Nannini, & Peru, 2015). Comparably, a negative lead of boys and of students who do not assume a tutor role during inter-student interactions is noted (Laws & Kelly, 2005), depending on the taught courses (De Boer et al., 2014; Nikolarazi et al., 2005). Furthermore, disabilities of low functionality, e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), cause more intense negative and less social stances in inclusive, rather than in mainstream educational settings, with student views aggravating in proportion to the respondents’ age increase (Mavropoulou & Sideridis, 2014; Tonnsen & Hahn, 2015).

One of the main factors influencing the attitudes of TD students towards integrating children with SEN is the family environment, especially the impact of parental attitudes, in particular of mothers (Laws, & Kelly, 2005; Nepi et al., 2015), more than of school teachers (Ferguson, 2008; Gasser et al., 2014; Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009). However, the opposite has also been observed (Tonnsen & Hahn, 2015). Finally, inclusive student attitudes are fueled bidirectionally with friendship establishment trends (Marshall et al., 2002; Mavropoulou & Sideridis, 2014; Nikolarazi et al., 2005).

Conclusions

Generally, it is deduced that the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream educational settings constitutes a field of expression of various and multifactorial attitudes. Firstly, regardless of the student age, parents of TD children and of children with mild SEN utter conflicting stances. Secondly, parents of children with moderate and/ or severe disabilities by majority assess positively the inclusive inter-student interactions. Particularly, the first and the latter formulate concerns regarding the arrangement of parameters associated with the teaching process and as regards to supporting pupils with and without SEN. What's more, the attitudes of parents of TD children are unrelated to their gender, age and educational level, whereas the attitudes of parents of children with SEN depend on their demographic, socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics, in relation to their children's age and diagnosis; the stances of both depend on their personal inclusive experiences. Thirdly, TD children by majority express adverse attitudes towards integration, with a precedence of boys and in relation to the students' SEN, less of motor disabilities and more of ASD. Fourthly, TD children's attitudes are influenced by the corresponding parental and schoolteachers' views, with a head start of the first.

However, certain research limitations of internal and external validity and reliability are posed, given the size of each population sample, as well as its selection and allocation procedure. Equally, the case by case data collection and statistical analysis proceedings do not permit the generalization of the aforementioned conclusions. Thus, future research should focus on the settlement of these specific methodological issues. Also, it could concentrate on the broader intercultural and concurrent examination of particular disabilities and on the interaction of individual influential factors regarding the respective attitudes expressed, both at in-school and at extracurricular level. At the same time, it might be helpful to use open-ended interview questions on a wider scale, in order to examine in greater detail the feelings of the surveyed. In conclusion, specialized or individualized interventional programs ought to be developed and documented by research, promoting multiply and systematically the broad integration of students with SEN.

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