Views and Perceptions of Senior Early Childhood Education Students Regarding Inclusive Education and Disability

Evdoxia Nteropoulou-Nterou ˙, Athina Zoniou-Sideri,

Nadia Lampropoulou, Lia Tsermidou

Faculty of Early Childhood Education, School of Education,
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens,
10680 Athens, Greece

Abstract

Inclusive education is increasingly being adopted as the most appropriate framework for organizing educational, but also social and political systems both in Europe and worldwide. Pedagogical departments around the world, converging on sociopolitical trends internationally, have introduced a series of actions aimed at promoting the concept of inclusive education and relevant issues in their curriculum. This research aims to map prevailing attitudes and opinions about disability in a population that is on the borderline between completion of their higher education studies and the gradual familiarity with the educational reality through internships. The main objectives of this research are to monitor and study the views and perceptions of senior Early Childhood Education students on inclusive education and disability and to solicit feedback from students about the curriculum of the Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE), National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, in regard to inclusive education.

Keywords: Disability, Early Childhood, Higher Education, Inclusive education

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˙ Corresponding author: Evdoxia Nteropoulou-Nterou
E-mail address: ederou@ecd.uoa.gr

1. Introduction

The importance of teacher attitudes for the success of inclusive education has been widely reported (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Sharma et al, 2009) and the findings from self-reported and observed practice provide evidence of the impact of teacher beliefs and attitudes (Stanovich and Jordan, 1998) on the success of inclusive education. Furthermore, as McLean (2008) argues, challenging university students to examine their attitudes towards disabled people is an ethical responsibility for tertiary institutions and, as previous research has shown, there is a clear connection between pre-service teacher views and attitudes and instructional practice.

This study aims to explore the perceptions of students on inclusive education and disability, as the latter can decisively determine the scope for action, change and evolution of educational interventions adopted in educational practice. These perceptions are the outcome of many factors and do not only emanate from the university's educational environment. On the contrary, students' experiences and the prevailing socio-political conditions play an essential role in their beliefs and attitudes towards disability (Zoniou-Sideri et al., 2005; Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006).

2. Methodology

This study adopts a combined methodological approach. The main advantage of such an approach lies in the degree of depth and the holistic approach of issues related to the topic under examination (Cohen & Manion, 2007; Mason 2002). The mixed methodological research design provides all the benefits of research data and research methods triangulation, which are necessary in educational research since the teaching-learning process is so complex that a single-method approach would yield limited and sometimes misleading findings (Cohen & Manion, 2007).

Therefore, in the context of a mixed research design and in order to meet the objectives of the survey, research tools both from the field of quantitative and qualitative research were employed for the collection of research data. More specifically, the research project used: a standard questionnaire in order to collect comparable and analyzable data through statistical data analysis methods; a semi- structured interview aiming at a thorough examination and analysis of the data; finally, content and discourse analysis of reports on differentiated educational interventions of students implemented during their internships.

The questionnaire was completed by 200 students during the academics year 2012-13 and 2013-14, the majority of whom were in their final year of undergraduate studies (85.0%). The questions focused on the following areas: relationship with special education, aims and general principles of inclusion, the conceptual context of inclusion, social attitudes towards diversity, barriers to inclusive education, the role of the inclusive educationalist, debt crisis and inclusive education, special conditions of inclusion, establishment of inclusive values and general assessment of inclusion.

Seventy two (72) senior students participated in the semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes, allowing time for an in-depth exploration of the students' views regarding specific parameters, which were also examined in the questionnaire.

All the students participating in the interviews had also attended an internship course in the university on differentiated pedagogy and were asked to record in writing the inclusive practices

they adopted in the classroom activities they designed, organised and implemented. The students worked in pairs during the internship and while drafting their final essay.

Data analysis of the students' interviews and essays was based on the method of thematic content analysis. Data processing and analysis of the questionnaires was based on the statistical package SPSS 21 for social sciences and the techniques of descriptive statistics.

3. Research outcomes

This paper focuses on a single aspect that emerged from the data analysis and was present in all three phases of the research: the conceptual definition of inclusion, as understood and implemented by the students.

3.1. Questionnaire

The majority of students agree that disabled students should attend general (or mainstream) school settings. According to the participants' answers inclusive education aims to eliminate all forms of educational exclusion, it concerns all students and places under negotiation the dominant architecture of school attendance. In addition, inclusion signifies the equal treatment of all students and educational staff, the participation of all students in the learning procedure, a battle against all barriers to learning for all students. Students also declare that inclusion means struggle with the aim to change the existing structures, transition from a welfare model to a model of equal opportunities and rights, acceptance of diversity, review of the values and general aims of education.

Table 1. At the level of proclamations

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The disabled student should attend general school	5 (2.5%)	13 (6.5%)	41 (20.5%)	93 (46.5%)	48 (24.0%)
Inclusive education concerns all students	3 (1.5%)	6 (3.0%)	13 (6.5%)	78 (39.0%)	100 (50.0%)
Inclusive education places under negotiation the dominant architecture of school attendance	2 (1.0%)	12 (6.0%)	37 (18.5%)	101 (50.5%)	47 (23.5%)
Inclusive education ensures the participation of all students in the school	0 (0.0%)	5 (2.5%)	7 (3.5%)	112 (56.0%)	75 (37.5%)
Inclusion means acceptance of diversity	2 (1.0%)	5 (2.5%)	4 (2.0%)	67 (33.5%)	122 (61.0%)

Students believe that it is very or extremely important to organise learning in an inclusive environment with the aim to promote the active participation of all students in the learning process.

It is also very or extremely important for the teaching staff to work towards removing all forms of restriction from the educational process for all students and towards the limitation of discrimination practices and the promotion of equality between students.

Table 2. At the level of proclamations

	Unimportant	Of little importance	Important	Very important	Extremely important
The organization of learning in inclusive education should promote the active participation of all students in the learning	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	9 (4.5%)	64 (32.0%)	125 (62.5%)
Inclusive education presupposes that teaching staff aims to remove restrictions of students in the educational process	1 (0.5%)	5 (2.5%)	11 (5.5%)	83 (41.5%)	97 (48.5%)
Inclusive education presupposes limiting discrimination practices	0 (0.0%)	5 (2.5%)	17 (8.5%)	68 (34.0)%	110 (55.0%)

Even though the students in previous questions agreed that inclusion concerns all students and that the disabled students should attend general education settings, at the point in the questionnaire, where the line of questioning becomes more specific, the majority of students agree that students with mild disabilities are the only ones that can easily meet the requirements of the general school and they consider the degree and type of disability as the main obstacle to inclusion. Students continue by stating that the presence of a special educator in the classroom is necessary in order for the student to be able to respond to the requirements of the general school.

Finally when the students are called upon to answer questions specifically oriented towards the conditions or prerequisites of inclusion, they agree that it is highly important to be able to prevent learning difficulties, to ensure the early identification and detection of disabilities and the cooperation with diagnostic committees for the prevention and early diagnosis of disabilities and special educational needs.

Table 2. Contradictions

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The disabled student can easily meet the general school requirements if he has a mild disability	7 (3.5%)	44 (22.0%)	45 (22.5%)	**92 (40.0%)**	10 (5.0%)
The disabled student requires the presence of a special educator	6 (3.0%)	29 (14.5%)	51 (25.5%)	**82 (41.0%)**	32 (16.0%)
The disabled student requires the presence of an educator who specializes in matters of disability diagnosis	13 (6.5%)	32 (16.0%)	45 (22.5%)	**78 (39.0%)**	32 (16.0%)
In the context of early childhood general educational settings it is necessary to prevent learning difficulties	5 (2.5%)	26 (13.0%)	44 (22.0%)	**90 (45.0%)**	33 (16.5%)
In the context of early childhood general educational settings it is necessary to identify and detect disabilities early	2 (1.0%)	15 (7.5%)	28 (14.0%)	**95 (47.5%)**	59 (29.5%)
In the context of early childhood general educational settings it is necessary to provide special education	10 (5.0%)	48 (24.0%)	51 (25.5%)	**64 (32.0%)**	24 (12.0%)
In the context of early childhood general educational settings it is necessary to cooperate with diagnostic committees for the prevention and early diagnosis of disabilities and special educational needs.	6 (3.0%)	20 (10.0%)	35 (17.5%)	**97 (48.5%)**	40 (20.0%)

3.2. Interviews

At the level of proclamations the participating students agree that inclusion concerns *all students* because it is directly connected to the notion of diversity: all students are different and hence all classrooms in today's schools are heterogeneous. They further state that since *all classrooms are heterogeneous, inclusion concerns both special and general education teachers.* All educators *need to acknowledge and accommodate/foster diversity.* Furthermore, all educators need to adopt the philosophy of inclusion not only in theory but also in practice. Each educationalist should be committed to carefully observing and taking into consideration the individual characteristics, wishes, experiences, interests and preferences of all students and proceeding accordingly to the design and implementation of teaching practice. The role of the inclusive educator is to promote inclusion, all students' active participation and engagement, to provide motivations and incentives and to create an educational setting for all students. Thus, the ultimate aim of inclusive education is for students not to be excluded from general education and for disabled students, in specific, not to be separated from and marginalized by their peers when they are in general education classrooms. As main barriers to inclusion the students identify the

negative attitudes towards diversity and the philosophy of inclusion; low expectations, stereotypical prejudice, and the lack of confidence in students, the traditional teacher-centered teaching and learning practices and the lack of teachers' education in inclusion.

Despite the students' proclamations that inclusion concerns all students and aims towards all students' active involvement and participation in a shared learning environment, when they were asked specifically which educational setting they consider as the most appropriate for the disabled students, the majority of the participants expressed the opinion that disabled students can attend general education settings only under certain conditions. To support their argument the senior students stress the explanation that general education classrooms are not the most appropriate school settings for the education of students with severe disabilities, without though being able to define the meaning of "severe" disability.

> "I believe that it depends on the diagnosis (...) if it is a severe type of disability he or she might need special help" (1a).
> "It is a problem if she can't follow, not even a little bit, what the other children can do, I don't know... it seems difficult" (1b).

Moreover, special schools are considered as the most appropriate educational setting since they appoint special educators, who have the appropriate training and specialization to support disabled students, whereas within general education settings teachers tend to marginalize and exclude students with disabilities. More often than not, in general schools specialized educational staff is absent whereas special schools are fully equipped and prepared to meet the needs of the disabled students with the appropriate resources, access and equipment.

> "We had an autistic child in the classroom, and I don't know if that student would be better if she was in a special school... but the fact remains that she didn't do anything in the classroom all day long besides placing and replacing cubes and balls in a row" (2a).
> "Basically I believe in inclusion, but as we observed in the kindergartens that we attended during our internships, general schools do not value difference. Educators do not provide students with the space they need. And there is the issue of accessibility; of course the school that we were had a ramp for the students to get in but, other than that, they don't support students" (5b).
> "And the educational practices used is another issue. They don't take students into account. For example, we had a child that did not understand the Greek language and we could see that he did not participate since he could not understand and the teachers' response was 'but he doesn't understand. What can I do?' Maybe that student should go somewhere else as no one helped him in the general school" (5a).

We should note another interesting point, which also highlights the issue under discussion; students feel confident to stress the importance of inclusion but, in practice, their reflections are contradictory once asked if they consider themselves as inclusive educators; the majority of students are then reluctant to provide a positive answer. They claim that it depends on the severity and the type of disability, the specific cases of disabled students in their classrooms and that they feel they need additional practical knowledge and experience.

> "Inclusive education is a way of life and it is very difficult for a single teacher to achieve it; it requires a lot of observation and research" (2_6b).
> "Inclusion is very difficult in practice; we have struggled a lot, because we needed to keep in mind all the needs that our students had and all their

skills and it is very difficult when you have 20 students to know everything, what their abilities and what their needs are or what they like. It takes time; I don't know" (2_3 α).

3.3. Essays

The final essays submitted by the senior students at the end of their internship in real-time school environments included clearly defined aims based on the principles of inclusive education and in the light of differentiated pedagogy. The main objectives included:

- The active participation, involvement and empowerment of all students during the process of planning, implementation and assessment of learning activities.
- Interaction, cooperation and group work.
- Activities based on former experiences, needs and interests of all children with a communicative motivation for all students.
- Activities of a multi-sensory character

The contradictions appear when the students implement the activities and two trends can be detected: a focus on the smooth implementation of the activity and a fear that it might diverge from the original planning while, in addition, an almost exclusive concentration on cognitive goals can be observed. As a result, the activities are rigid, and allow no flexibility during the phase of implementation.

"Our main goal is for all the children in the classroom to pay attention to
what we have planned for them and not to dismiss it" (e7b:13).

Regarding the active participation and involvement of students it was evident in most essays that the children carry out the instructions of the senior students and that for the most part the activities take place in the discussion circle area where the children are asked to answer specific preset questions. Therefore, the children's involvement is limited to whether they have actually followed and implemented the indicated activities and instructions, without objections, without leaving the group, without complaining, without refusing to follow orders and without making mistakes.

"The most encouraging thing is that the children sat for very long time in the
discussion circle area, they were quiet and remained there and in their tables
also for a long period of time and they followed willingly our instructions
despite their potential fatigue" (e2a:12).

In addition, it seems that the senior students confuse the notion of "all students", as it virtually becomes equivalent with the "majority of pupils". The following excerpt from an essay illustrates exactly this point:

"Generally the implementation of the activity progressed as we had
anticipated [in the stage of design the activity aimed at all pupils' active
participation and aimed at maintaining the interest of all students] and only
five children did not participate at all, three of whom were hyperactive
during the entire storytelling. These children were enrolled in the inclusive
classroom (...)" (e2b:14).

Concerning the assessment process, theoretical inconsistency in terms of methodological design was observed. The original aim of the university students, as described in the essays, was to conduct the final assessment of the educational process with the children; nevertheless, in most cases the children were not involved in the assessment process and when involved they were asked to answer specific and predefined sets of statements (i.e. I enjoyed reading this fairy tale/I

did not enjoy reading this fairy tale, I liked it when we danced/ I didn't like it when we danced, etc.) or by conducting a type of voting procedure concerning which activity they enjoyed the most. In the whole process, children's personal reflection was absent and so were the opportunities for free expression. Even the way in which the assessment process was implemented raises concerns as it is based primarily on verbal interaction.

The multi-sensory character of the activities was also limited, as the students felt that they had taken into consideration this parameter by simply with introducing tools, such as puppets, music and movement. Also the theoretical framework was absent from the design and the implementation of the activities.

In relation to team work, the majority of the activities took place in the discussion circle area, in whole-class sessions where interaction and dialogue was restricted to teacher-student exchanges and, to a lesser extent, involved student-to-student discussions; even more, in the work tables each child performed their own single work (painting, arts and crafts, activity sheets).

> "The children are divided into groups depending on what they want to build and they sit at their tables so that everyone can make their own construction..."
>
> The most characteristic phrase used in the essays to mark the beginning of each activity is the one where the children gather in the discussion circle area"
>
> "We gather the children in the discussion circle area and we begin talking..."
>
> "While the children are in the discussion circle area..."
>
> "In the end we gathered again in the discussion area..."
>
> "We encourage the children to sit in the discussion area and we sit in the centre..."
>
> "Initially we sit in the discussion area..."

A key concern of the senior students was for all the children to sit in the discussion area and there are many references in their essays concerning their attempts to achieve this goal or their efforts to bring children back to the discussion area.

> "We made several attempts to convince the child to participate in the discussion; despite our efforts he sat for a while in the discussion area and then again he moved away and we did not manage to bring him back. He did not respond either to our calls or to his inclusive teacher's call who intervened at that point" (e3a:10).

Finally, in terms of the topic selection and the design and planning the documentation in the essays was incomplete and often almost non-existent concerning the selection criteria and/or the steps and reflections that led the students to choose a specific topic. In all the essays the topic was announced in the introduction and few were the exceptions where the students provided specific details of their rationale.

Conclusion

A general overall conclusion from the data analysis suggests that the students underline the value of inclusive philosophy, but at the same time they exhibit inconsistency between theory and practice. Thus, it appears that the students clinging to the notion of normality use politically correct reasoning and their studies in pedagogical university departments shield this rigid way of thinking. This study has been a springboard for feedback and assessment of the opportunities provided towards the direction of inclusive education, through the courses offered by the Early Childhood Education Department, University of Athens. In this light, the main concern emerging from the results of this research focuses on the way that the offered teachers' education could be differentiated; more specifically, what changes or additions are crucial in order to provide an appropriate educational context where prospective educators could analyse in depth the issues of inclusive education, become aware of the meaning of "difference" and "diversity" and move beyond the level of theoretical postulates; to find the appropriate processes that will help and support future teachers to familiarize themselves with the process of self-reflection and to reinforce the role of inclusive educators with regard to the adoption of inclusive practices.

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