

# Perceptions and attitudes of general education teachers towards special education

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## Introduction

In recent years we see that schools have changed in many ways as they were structured up to twenty years ago. The changes have to do both in terms of the structure of the school unit and access to children with special educational needs, as well as in the philosophy of the school about how the lesson can be done and which children it will give the opportunity to be educated.<sup>1</sup> There were several cultures that tried to impart inclusion to students with special educational needs which they achieved successfully while at other times there was failure due to many stereotypes and prejudices that exist in the educational community.<sup>1</sup>

We can say that there were enough collaborations both within the school unit and within society for the school to be able to develop its role and send a message that equality and equal learning opportunities emerge for all children and for all citizens without exception. Nevertheless, there were several stereotypes in schools which they tried to overcome with the so-called inclusive education.<sup>2</sup> Inclusion shows that it treats each person individually as a personality and at the same time treats them as a person who belongs to a more general group and must have equal opportunities and equal rights in the educational process.<sup>3</sup>

Inclusive education brought special education to the surface as a concept and an indivisible part of general education. For this reason, several collaborations between general and special education teachers emerged and special education became quite well known within general education.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we will examine the views of general education teachers regarding special education teachers, students attending special education and special education structures.

## Historical review of special education

Special education throughout the years tried to develop equally with general education even though it encountered several obstacles and prejudices both in Greek society and in other countries of the world.<sup>4</sup> The concept of special education in education was developed from 1980 onwards as until then we saw that children who had a difference were institutionalized without giving them the appropriate educational opportunities as they had to do with all other children.<sup>5</sup> Also, in the first years of special education around the world, we notice that because it was not known to teachers and to society, the agencies involved could not understand which children attend special schools, which children have special educational needs.<sup>6</sup>

Special education encountered several obstacles to develop and pass a philosophy in society that although there were separate special education structures all children should have the same learning opportunities and the same rights. We notice that in the following years the concept of inclusion was developed, which tried to bring together general and special education, with the result that stereotypes and prejudices began to exist because they knew the diversity of people in special education and yet they could not embrace various things which they were embodied in education.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, pedagogical science has tried to bring together general and special education through a new institution and a new philosophy called inclusion. Inclusion does not distinguish special education from general education but tries to integrate the two specific categories as one and unified education. Several institutions of inclusion have been developed which sometimes successfully and sometimes not try to stand out in the school.<sup>8</sup> We can say that with the introduction of special education through inclusion, there are stereotypes and prejudices that take place both in teachers and students.<sup>9</sup> This paper examines the opinions of general education teachers on how they see both their colleagues in special education and the children who attend special education and also the support structures of special education.<sup>9</sup>

## Opinions about colleagues

We will begin with general education teachers' views of their special education colleagues. We can say that until a few years ago when there was no concept of inclusion in schools, teachers' views were full of stereotypes and prejudices towards the work that special education teachers do. Because the state separated education into general and special education, society had various stereotypes and prejudices about which people work in special education and which students attend it. General education teachers considered the work done by their colleagues in special education easy, as they felt that they do not have a large workload in special schools and in supportive education structures for children with special educational needs. In particular, there are studies that show that general education teachers did not want to work with the special education teachers of the integration departments and considered that the work done in the

specific structure is something very easy, as a result of which they are possessed daily by stereotypes and prejudices towards the person of the their colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

Some stated in the past that educating small groups of children with one or two students in the integration department is an easy process that does not require effort, while on the other hand they stated that the specific teachers did not have the necessary knowledge to teach the subjects of classes.<sup>10-12</sup>

Many times, general education teachers do not want to collaborate with special education teachers because they consider the special education degree and in general the specific knowledge of their colleagues to be undervalued. Several times they stated that special education teachers do not know about general pedagogy and for this reason they should not exist in school units. They consider special education teachers as therapists, i.e. something similar to speech therapists and occupational therapists. Many times when the special education teachers of the inclusion departments looked for ways to collaborate with the general education teachers, it was observed that they did not find a response both due to a lack of collaborative culture and because of stereotypes that the general education teachers had.<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, the specific views of general education teachers have changed. Due to the promotion of inclusive education, a new type of inclusion has been developed which is implemented in the classroom by special education teachers. The new type of inclusion is the parallel support of students with special educational needs. This is how the phenomenon has been observed in recent years of special education teachers working in the classroom with students who have special educational needs. This specific event brought teachers into direct contact with each other and thus we see the stereotypes and prejudices that general education teachers had begin to decrease.<sup>13</sup> The coexistence of general and special education teachers in the classroom has given a new trend and a new philosophy in education as collaborations develop between them and this results in general education teachers understanding the work and work that special education teachers do.<sup>14</sup> This is how we see in recent years that they collaborate and change the detailed curricula in the classroom, diversify teaching for the benefit of their students and develop cultures of cooperation with the rest of the institutions of both the school and society in order to improve their educational work.<sup>14</sup>

### Views on students

General education teachers also develop opinions about students who are educated in special education structures. We can say that these opinions are again separated by whether or not there was inclusion in their schools. So we see that in the previous years when there was no proper training for general education teachers, they had enough stereotypes and prejudices about what they believed about children who had a disability or special educational needs.<sup>14</sup> Especially in the 1980s and 1990s we can easily find that general education teachers did not pay much attention to those children who could not participate in their lesson and expressed the opinion that they should be marginalized or change the structure of education. Since there was no proper diagnosis for these children, general education teachers did not want to engage in the learning part to a large extent to be able to help more the typically developing children they taught in their classroom. In fact, they had the belief that children who wanted special education had specific potential both in their school performance and in what they can offer in society and this has the result of either marginalizing them in the classroom or forcing them to stop school or to attend another school structure such as special schools.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, they did not give much weight to the voices of children who attended special education facilities or may want special education.<sup>15</sup> The voices of these children often expressed the opinion that they were not receiving the education they should receive and the teachers did not realize that they were not offering their educational work properly. This is translated either as a lack of culture towards these children or that they did not have specialized knowledge to be able to properly offer their educational work to students who wanted special education.<sup>15</sup> However, since inclusion came to school units, we notice that the opinions of general education teachers have changed for special education children.<sup>16</sup> In recent years there have been several training days and several seminars to be able to specialize general education teachers in accepting special education students and in being able to help them properly to develop both in the cognitive field and in other areas that are useful in their daily life.<sup>17</sup> We see that they no longer single out the children in the classroom and often express a willingness to create a team-collaborative climate in their classroom so that special education children can develop their personality in accordance with the democratic values held by the teachers and the school unit in which they study. The cooperation that general education teachers have with special education teachers also contributes to this because in this way they know better the potential of these children and also learn the ways in which they will help these children to develop academically and include them in school and social activities.<sup>17</sup>

### Views on special education structures

General education teachers also express several opinions about special education structures as they existed in the past and as they exist today.<sup>18</sup> In the past, they believed that special education facilities were a ghetto for children with severe disabilities and severe mental illnesses.<sup>18</sup> They believed that special schools could be attended by students with mental and motor disabilities or autism. Many times they had the opinion that children with special educational needs do not study in separate special education structures.<sup>19</sup> Another point of view that existed as a stereotype and prejudice in previous years was the fact that special schools did not carry out educational work, but in essence were school units that help students in their daily living and their independence as well as their functionality.<sup>20</sup>

Also, in recent years, general education teachers express positive opinions about their school's inclusion departments.<sup>14</sup> They state that they must be equipped with the appropriate supervisory material to be able to help their colleagues who carry out work in the specific structures, as well as there must be direct access to students with special educational needs. They report that the specific structure of special education can offer positive things to students who have learning difficulties and special educational needs. More generally, their view of the inclusion department has changed compared to previous years because they are beginning to learn about special education issues and understand more easily that children can improve their special educational needs within the inclusion department.<sup>14</sup>

They also express an opinion on parallel support which is a special education structure.<sup>14</sup> General education teachers have positive views on parallel support as it is carried out within a school unit as they state that it is an inclusive form of education that can help students with special educational needs and will not stigmatize them in the eyes of the rest of the children in the class but also of the whole society. Through the parallel support, they believe that they will receive the education that every child of a school unit should have and the children will be able to see improvement in their daily educational work. More generally, the opinions of general education teachers in recent years

have changed a lot compared to previous years because they come into contact with special education colleagues in the everyday life of the school and thus face the issue of special education and the structures from a different perspective as they support their students.<sup>14</sup>

## Culture change

The views of general education teachers have changed in recent years because educational policy has moved at different rates as we see inclusion and inclusive cultures that exist within a school unit emerge in recent years. Educators are continuously trained in both special educational needs and collaborative culture with special education colleagues. They try to spread the message of change both to the students and to the society to which the school belongs, so that inclusive education is promoted and their views are different towards people with disabilities and people with special educational needs.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the state must be of assistance to general education teachers and train them appropriately and on a permanent basis so that they can continue to understand the requirements of special education and help their colleagues so that together they can reach the desired result that is the inclusion of children with special educational needs and the inclusion of children with disabilities. Also, there must be an inclusive leader within the school unit in which they work who will shape the appropriate climate between general and special education teachers so that they can smoothly continue the educational process and develop collaborative cultures.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

We see that the work highlights an important issue that has existed in education in recent years and it is the opinions of general education teachers regarding their colleagues in special education, the children who need special education and also opinions on the structure of special education. In previous years, there were many stereotypes and prejudices because general education teachers were not specialized. These change with inclusive education which properly trains them and thus we see general education teachers now having positive views of their colleagues and of all involved members in special education. We must emphasize the fact that in order to change the views of general education teachers there must be a daily friction with their colleagues in special education so that they understand the educational work they perform and learn the same ways in which they can intervene within their classroom and to help children who need special education.<sup>10</sup>

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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