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DISABILITY STIGMA. GREEK PRIMARY EDUCATION TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The present study attempts to explore the views of primary school teachers. Teachers in primary schools are crucial agents of school mediation, support, and enhancement of processes of empowering social interaction with people with disabilities. Participants of the research were 32 primary school teachers. Fourteen persons were male. The research instrument chosen was a semi-structured interview. The results of our study revealed that (a) the majority of primary school teachers considered that stigmatisation of people with disabilities is real in education, (b) the inclusion policy has no impact at all, and that there is a contradiction between the institutional discourse which is expressed and the policies implemented in the school context, and (c) the characteristics attributed to people with disabilities contribute to their social stigmatisation and (d) hinder the establishment of a functional personal and social identity. The results highlight the need for educational policy reforms for people with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability, primary education, stigma

Introduction

It is widely accepted that disability is a multifactorial phenomenon, and its definition differs in terms of conceptualisation according to the scientific or social field of approach (Campbell, 2009). The World Health Organisation approaches disability by interacting with individual characteristics and environmental factors (World Health Organisation, 2011, pp. 3-4). Moreover, different models of disability have been proposed in the international literature that presents its multiple dimensions (religious, medical, social, human rights model, cultural, economic) (Retief and Letšosa, 2018, pp. 2-7). Social scientists who approach disability through the theoretical framework of the social model shape their interpretations in both the social and educational context by considering the differences between individuals as social and cultural differences and that they may be remedied by formal equality policies (Barnes, 2012). Disability, as well as the meaning assigned to it, in its contemporary approach, includes both the biological difficulties of the individual and the social aspect of their inclusion in a community of people, as one part affects and interacts with the other, creating challenges and obstacles both in the development and in the social and cultural coexistence of individuals. These social practices can be seen as common to all groups characterised by diversity in the context of social inequalities. In this context, disability is seen as another cultural diversity that shapes social policy approaches relevant to those groups that are politically portrayed as minorities with particular social and cultural characteristics (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Michail, 2016). It is important to note here, however, that disability is neither a strictly social nor cultural matter, nor is it solely a matter of biological incapacity... The split that the social model of disability makes by focusing on and underlining more the social dimensions of disability (Oliver, 1990. 2013. Oliver, and Barnes, 2010) forms conditions of neutralisation in approaches to disability which do not highlight the differences that exist not only between disabilities but also with other diversities with the social and cultural minority groups and which shape conditions of social inequalities, including gender, race, and ethnicity. Disabilities result from the interaction between biological and socio-cultural factors, making it impossible to separate them in most cases. Disabilities should be addressed through the concept of a holistic design and adaptation of social policies so that both ecological factors that affect the individual's opportunities, as well as community and social factors that shape

conditions of inequality and power within the social context, would be taken into account (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Michail, 2016).

Theoretical approach. Conceptualising stigma

Goffman (1963: 9) notes that stigma is "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance, "including on the grounds of "abominations of the body" or "blemishes of individual character". The social stigma is deeply degrading or disgraceful. The one who bears it is transformed from an integrated being to one who is devalued (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Stigma is defined as a form of negative stereotyping and prejudice resulting from false and distorted cognitive schemas that lead to discrimination towards stigmatised individuals or groups and is associated with negative attitudes, individually or collectively, towards them because of one or more of their characteristics (Corrigan and Penn, 1999, p. 766; Hilton and Hippel, 1998, p. 242). Stigma is a disability of society to recognise the equality of difference, a cultural "indifference" of the dominant for anything that is not included in their stereotypical perceptions. Stigma is a continuation of the social construction of similarities and differences that are involved in the social interaction of individuals and are inscribed in the identities of the "normal" and those who are stigmatised.

The social devaluation of the person is composed at a micro-level of interaction (Goffman, 1963) but is mediated by the historical context of the field of action (Zisi and Savvakis, 2019). The "dramaturgy " of social interaction constructs representations of the self-mediated by social constraints and provides contextual choices. The self and the person's conceptualisation through the mediation of dynamic interaction with the other, space, and the historical environment, shape its characteristics, which can be overturned as they are not a stable condition but a dynamic phenomenon influenced by the above. Goffman (1963) states that the self is determined through the needs of public interpretation of the individual's life actions as well as their characteristics, categorising individuals according to the standards of 'normality' accepted by society. These characteristics are internalised and embodied, producing "master patterns," imposing behaviours, interpretations of the social, and the resistances of the individual who attempts to eliminate or conceal it.

Goffman does not distinguish merely individuals but their prospects within 'mixed interactions' (Makrinioti, 2001). Persons attempt to manage the identified negative characteristic (e.g., reveal, conceal, silence, mask it). Three overlapping social processes are associated with stigma: stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). Thus, people with disabilities self-manage impressions, their externalised self-image, in terms of the statistical majority and its expectations, and either self-stigmatize (Link and Phelan, 2001) or endure public stigma (Pelleboer-Gunnink, van Weeghel and Embregts, 2021) or structural stigma (Hansen, Bourgois and Drucker, 2014), in a derogatory context dominated by normative and legitimised patterns of action and perceptions of reality (Goffman, 1963). The attribution and maintenance of one's stigma and "label" are related to the frequency of attribution of the label, the prestige of the stigmatised, and acceptance by the social group (Lamnias, 2001, pp. 228-229).

Disability and Stigma in Education

The school system, through symbolic violence, labels diverse individuals who deviate from the accepted norms of the educational environment (Solvang, 2007). The normative standards applied in educational systems are adapted to the rationality of an over-socialized reality, and the education of disabled persons is structurally constrained, a fact that predetermines ideological approaches as well as educational policies (Slee, 1997). In disability, 'ableism' and 'able-bodiedness' are part of the symbolic violence of the dominant in the social field, i.e., social subjects over socially differentiated individuals, shaping different governing frameworks for the transmission of social information and personal image to the "outside," constituting aspects of the self and the biographical management of disabled people. The deviation from the dominant structural norms and their recognition, through interaction in the social field, both by the person himself and his social partners, shapes the stigmatised disabled person (Lalvani, 2015). The hegemonic discourse of normality reproduces the stigmatisation and devaluation of disabled persons, as well as the stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination that are associated with it. School as social institution produces social systems of oppression and subordination and various forms of marginalisation and stigmatisation towards vulnerable groups of students (Liasidou and Ioannidou, 2021). At the same time, the medical-biological model dominates the school context (Lalvani, 2015), which has the theme concerning the body at its core, fostered by the naturalistic approach, which perceives the human body as a whole pre-social, purely biological entity (Goffman, 1963). The perspective of this model shifts the responsibility for the disability of the disabled to the individual and indirectly to their family, characterising the person as inadequate and deficient, projecting a negative image of their body and their social life in general (Booth, 1998). The

stigmatisation and negative feelings accompanying the conceptualisation of disability further legitimise society's attitudes. Disability represents a biological pathology of the individual, and the individual is its victim. Moralisation and stigmatisation intensify the humiliation and devaluation that a disabled person receives as a 'miasma' because of their diversity (Savvakis, 2013 pp, 207-208). The individual is marginalised from the social environment and placed at a distance from social actors. Research has evidenced that in the school context, 'labels' shape specific ways of interacting and coping (Taylor et al., 2010, p. 192). Negative stereotypes of students with disabilities are dominant (Corrigan and Penn, 1999; WHO, 2011). Stigmatised children feel discrimination, suffer a reduced sense of worth, and experience depression and social isolation (Green, 2005), as well as accumulated frustration, anxiety, worry, and anger (Ali, Strydom, Hassiotis, Williams and King, 2008). Some students with disabilities suffer from negative attitudes and abusive behaviours from typical individuals (Salinger, 2020). Several times a child with a disability is seen by other peers as weak and is a victim of bullying because of its label (Nabuzoka and Smith, 1993; Segall and Campbell, 2012). School bullying is a common phenomenon faced by children with disabilities because of the label attached to them, which affects their self-esteem (Salinger, 2020).

The attitudes of educational community members, teachers, and students are crucial in the favourable treatment or stigmatisation of people with disabilities (Alhumaid, 2023; Mitroulaki, Samakouri and Serdari, 2023; Moriña and Carnerero, 2022). Disabled students form their identity through a collective experience inscribed in their bodies and constructed by other educational community members in the context of school interaction (Mueller, 2019). Most research reports that teachers have a generally positive attitude toward people with disabilities and their inclusion in typical schooling (Avramidis and Kalyva, 2007; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Koutrouba, Vamvakari and Theodoropoulos, 2008; Van Steen and Wilson, 2020) and that this is mediated by cultural or demographic factors (years of service, gender, education level) (Van Steen and Wilson, 2020), by type of disability (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000), and interaction with disabled students during their education or previous teaching experience (Van Mieghem, Verschueren, Petry and Struyf, 2020). Teachers appear to have more positive attitudes when it concerns co-teaching for mild cases of people with disabilities. They have negative attitudes toward students with severe disabilities, mainly if the inclusion affects their classroom (Campbell, Gilmore and Cuskelly, 2003; Ward and Le-Dean, 1996). Teachers feel insecure and anxious (Eleftheriou, Stamou, Alevriadou and Tsakiridou, 2013). The student's functioning facilitates teachers' positive attitudes towards a student with a disability (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000), class size (Kourkoutas, Stavrou and Loizidou, 2017), and the existence of support staff. Teachers' attitudes are influenced by their lack of training and education on disability issues (Becker and Palladino, 2016; Eleftheriou, Stamou, Alevriadou and Tsakiridou, 2013). In addition, students appear to have restricted interactions, or neutral or mixed attitudes towards disability, while the type of disability and motivation to interact with people with disabilities play an essential role for people with disabilities and their co-teaching (De Vroey, Struyf and Petry, 2016; Nowicki, 2006; Shalev, Asmus, Carter and Moss, 2016; Van Mieghem, Verschueren, Petry and Struyf, 2020). At the same time, institutional support (teacher training, logistical infrastructure, curricula) is insufficient, and including people with disabilities create discrimination and social stigma (Coleman, McDonnell, Bowman, Eichelberger, Ryan & Conradi, 2023; Then and Pohlmann-Rother, 2022).

As far as the institutional treatment of persons with disabilities in Greece regarding education, it is observed that although several legislative regulations are in line with those of international organisations (Kontiadis and Moussmouti, 2014; UNESCO, 1994), progress however, remains in a simple - legislative framework, with many of the laws being delayed in their implementation (the corresponding IDs are not enacted) or never implemented (Lampropoulou and Panteliadou, 2000; Haroupias, 2011). Furthermore, the Greek Ombudsman (2015) for the current state of special education notes that the problems related to understaffing, the "inadequate educational support for students with disabilities, the "chronic underfunding of special education and the inadequacy of allocated resources".

The present study aims to investigate cases of stigmatisation of people with disabilities through primary school teachers' views. Research questions posed were: a) what are the structural issues related to the stigmatisation of persons with disabilities, b) what are the attitudes of other members of the school community towards persons with disabilities, and c) what is the perception of the person with disabilities about themselves.

Method

The qualitative method was chosen to research because it allows the investigation of the meanings and representations that the subjects attribute to social phenomena and processes (Iosifidis, 2017).

Participants

Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with primary school teachers in North Aegean for this research. Fourteen persons were male. The ages ranged from 32 years old to 53 years old. Their years of

experience were between 4 to 28 years. We focused our interest on primary school teachers' views in North Aegean about co-teaching because a) teachers' conceptualisations of disability mediate social representations of disability in the school context and the inclusion of disabled students. Teachers are vital agents of school mediation and supporting or undoing processes of empowering social interaction with disabled people, as well as their right to an education for all and the elimination of their social exclusion; b) teachers play an essential role in the initial school socialisation of children in primary school; c) North Aegean is an island region, and the south-eastern border of the European Union; and d) the concept of co-teaching is the project of contemporary education.

Data collection instruments

The semi-structured interview method was used to conduct the research. In semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions are used so that the participants can freely express their opinions, ideas, and perceptions about the social phenomenon under consideration through their discourse (Iosifidis, 2017; Mason, 2009). In addition, semi-structured interviews have thematic orientations of the research process and allow the researcher to collect in-depth information (Iosifidis, 2017). The interview guide constructed was based on theory and research on disability (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Michail, 2016; Barnes, 2012; Oliver, 1990; 2013; Retief and Letšosa, 2018) and stigma (Buljevac, Majdak and Leutar, 2012; Goffman, 1963; Shifrer, 2013) and included questions related to a) the conceptualisation of disability; b) educational policies in Greece about disabled students; and c) barriers to inclusion of disabled students.

Research process

During the research process, the ethical issues (anonymity, consent protocol, right of withdrawal, notification of results) of the research implementation were respected (BERA, 2011). The interviews had an average duration of 45 min. The analysis of the qualitative data, a crucial stage in theorising and answering the research questions, was done through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, yielding in-depth information about the research topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 2). After the data was collected, it was transcribed into text, and then it was coded. After the analysis, codes were extracted, similarities and differences were identified, and categorisations and themes were formulated to reflect the discourse and opinions of the research subjects (Mantzoukas, 2007).

Findings

The findings of this study present views and cases on the stigmatisation of people with disabilities in primary Greek education. These views are part of teachers' general views on the educational inclusion of people with disabilities.

α) Structural stigma

According to most teachers, the state's inclusion policy has progressed in establishing parallel support structures and democratising the school. However, several problems remain, and the efforts undertaken are considered an "alibi" for appeasement policy. The education system itself, through its contradictory practices, structurally stigmatises disabled persons. There is a contradiction between the discourse of the institutions and the policies implemented, which is sometimes simply a 'buffer' to the demands and needs of vulnerable groups in society. Teachers report that educational policies are not appropriate,

E3: "The state has a positive view of including people with disabilities in mainstream school. However, the will is not enough appropriate decisions must be adopted...".

E7: " I believe that the education system is democratic, but practically speaking, this is not always the case...".

E16: "...the exclusion and marginalisation of pupils with disabilities in "special schools," preventing their socialisation and reinforcing already existing dismissive and sometimes racist attitudes..."

there are organisational problems (shoddiness, inadequate material, and technical infrastructure)

E11: "... the infrastructure is incomplete; they have disability ramps for people with mobility problems, but the school facilities are not equipped to support a student, e.g., with a visual disability... The available curricula are adapted to the typical student ... "

insufficient staff and inadequate teacher training

E8: " I do not know if there is a policy. Judging by the number of hires made in the last 20 years, which is zero...."

E27: " I know nothing of their needs... It makes me nervous that if I have to deal with them"

E18: "...I think teacher training has lagged a lot...."

inappropriate teacher culture,

E9: "The culture of older colleagues, who are more passive, without motive, I think ... when E11: " ... I need to do something with an old colleague she does not feel the mood to do it."

and are driven by a particular ideological orientation: protection of economic interests, lack of solidarity, and examination-centred system.

E22: "Obviously, the policy of the State serves economic purposes only..."

E6: "No. No. The school is oriented in one direction only ... the entrance of a student, for example, to university ... the schoolwork for those who can succeed and have the right support all others are left behind...."

b) Public stigma

Teachers noted a generally negative social context in the education system, where prejudice, indifference, and negative attitudes lead to a suffocating framework of marginalisation for several groups of disabled people. Moreover, individuals are attributed with characteristics that stigmatise them and hinder the establishment of functional social identities. However, it is stressed that the situation has been changing slowly in recent years. Thus, teachers distinguished racist attitudes and bullying phenomena.

According to the teachers in our study, racist attitudes included disrespect towards people with disabilities, negative comments, and marginalisation in school activities. Parents and students express these attitudes.

E30: "I have happened to see racist attitudes of typical students towards a student with a disability, despising him, not paying attention to him, this racist behaviour also exists from parents who do not accept their children to be co-educated in the same place."

E17: "... of course, the mockery "Why do you have those eyes", "Why don't you talk to us", "You are stupid", "retard", these are all common in the school environment... "

E4: "In recent years, this situation is slowly changing; parents and typical students are being informed ...".

In addition, teachers mentioned some incidents of bullying, which might not be too many, but they target people with disabilities because of their diversity and create an adverse emotional climate.

E12: "The child I have this year left his previous school because he was bullied due to his disability. In our school, I think he is included quite well ..."

E18: "...I have never met any disabled children who have been bullying before; she is the first child ..."

E5: "Targeting, mocking, ... are also at vulnerable ages, whether we are talking about primary school or teenage ages."

c) Self-stigma

People with disabilities experience the consequences of their social stigmatisation: bad feelings, marginalisation, or devaluation.

E23: "I teach an elementary integration class. I have a disabled girl with an intellectual disability. None of the children keeps her company; she is always with me during school breaks and tells me she feels lonely. When I tried to talk to the other children, they told me they could not stand her ... last week while I was entering school, I walked in with this little girl. All the children said, 'Good morning, madam'; the girl also replied, 'Hello, good morning,' but they turned their heads dismissively and did not address her at all..."

Discussion - Conclusions

The present study attempts to investigate cases of stigmatisation of people with disabilities through primary school teachers' views. The research questions were associated with the structural issues related to the stigmatisation of persons with disabilities, the attitudes of other members of the school community towards persons with disabilities, and the perceptions of the person with disabilities about themselves.

Teachers focused on the rights policies implemented, emphasising state disability protection and education legislation. They considered that the state at the level of the legislation is in line with the general project of the rights of persons with disabilities and theoretically reinforces policies for their inclusion in society, which is part of the functional principles of the democratic constitution. It is also essential that the teachers in our research acknowledge the evolutionary process of legislative adaptation of Greek laws following the regulations for persons with disabilities adopted by international organisations. They find, however, that if the system is expressed in terms of education for all, in the reality of everyday practice, there is inherent structural stigmatisation of persons with disabilities. They mentioned, however, that although the educational system talks about education for all, in the reality of everyday practices, there is structural stigmatisation of people with disabilities. The discrepancy between the policy of intentions and public discourse and their daily school implementation occurs because the deficiencies and incompatibilities stigmatise people who need help to cope with the demands of the education system. Evidence reported in the Greek literature supports a positive attitude of teachers toward the co-teaching of people with disabilities (Avramidis and Kalyva, 2007; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Koutrouba, Vamvakari and Theodoropoulos, 2008), but also the discontinuities of the policies implemented and the symbolic violence of the educational system to mainstream people with disabilities (Charoupias, 2011; Giavrimis, 2018; Greek Ombudsman, 2015; Mavropalias and Anastasiou, 2016.).

Thus, they pointed out negative issues related to educational bureaucracy, culture and training of teachers, and material infrastructure, as well as that policies are fragmented and often ideologically oriented (serving

economic interests, lack of solidarity, examination-centred system). (Becker and Palladino, 2016; Charupias, 2011; Eleftheriou et al., 2013; Lampropoulou and Panteliadou, 2000.). The Greek Ombudsman (2015), in its periodic reports, highlights similar concerns about including persons with disabilities. The structural characteristics of the educational system emphasise inextricably the lack of freedom of accessibility and autonomy of persons with disabilities. On the other hand, it creates barriers to their acceptance and social inclusion and emphasises their partial or complete educational exclusion.

Teachers refer to the educational community members who form, establish and reproduce stereotypes or prejudices. The negative representations of people with disabilities characteristics and the social interactions produced highlight the over-socialisation of a normalised reality, stigmatising the diversity of the 'other.' The comparison with the normative standards of the dominant groups in society leaves no room for inclusion but pushes people with disabilities toward stigmatisation. Comparison with the normative standards of the dominant society groups does not allow for inclusion but drives people with disabilities into stigmatisation. The public stigma that emerges through racist attitudes, bullying, exclusion and teasing, prejudice, and indifference form a suffocating framework of marginalisation for many groups of disabled people (Alhumaid, 2023; Mitroulaki, Samakouri and Serdari, 2023). Students in the research appear to have limited contact or neutral or mixed attitudes towards disability, and the type of disability and motivation to interact with disabled people plays a vital conditioning role for disabled people and their co-teaching (De Vroey, Struyf and Petry, 2016; Nowicki, 2006; Shalev, Asmus, Carter and Moss, 2016; Van Mieghem, Verschueren, Petry and Struyf, 2020). The 'label' of disability functioning as a form of social control of the categorisation of social deviance, which the individuals subsequently internalise by accepting their inclusion in the deviant group (Daskalakis, 2017, p. 140). Individuals are attributed with characteristics that stigmatise them and hinder the formation of functional social identities. However, it is emphasised that in recent years the conditions are changing but at a slow pace. People with disabilities self-stigmatize themselves and experience the consequences of their social stigma, either as negative feelings, marginalisation, or devaluation. The stigmatised person's acceptance of the 'deficit' is the only social strategy for social integration. Otherwise, social rejection and exclusion are the overall outcomes (Makrinioti, 2001).

The dominant normality of the teacher's demands stigmatises the personal image of the individual and the externalised self and, at the same time, fluidises his "social security". For a stigmatised individual, these are a condition of a "spoiled identity" of a "devalued individual". The ethics of social practice, structured in social interaction and transformed into internal dynamics, predetermines individuals' behaviour and social participation. The "microphysics of power" of normality, normative standards, and symbolic violence shape the body's disciplines and legitimise social action by classifying persons into social positions (Goffman, 1963).

In conclusion, the results of the research revealed that (a) the majority of secondary school teachers believed that stigmatisation of people with disabilities is real in education, (b) the inclusion policy has no effect whatsoever, and that there is a contradiction between the discourse and the policies implemented, which is, sometimes, just a "buffer" against the demands and needs of vulnerable groups in society and (c) characteristics that stigmatise them socially are attributed to people with disabilities. Teachers identify parts of a hostile school context, where prejudice, indifference, and interference create a stifling environment that marginalises several groups of disabled people. Co-teaching and equal social inclusion will prevent their stigmatisation, marginalisation, and categorisation as "others" (Giavrimis, 2018a, b; Ferreira and Mäkinen, 2017; Waitoller and Artiles, 2013). The issue of effective education for people with disabilities is necessary to emphasise the need to create a school that includes all students so that the concept of "diversity" is identified with the idea of necessity in a model of coexistence that rejects marginalisation (Mantzikos and Lappa, 2023; Slee, 2011).

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