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CO-EDUCATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING WITHIN THE POSTMODERN CONTEXT. TRANSITIONING FROM INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS TO PRACTICAL APPLICATION IN GREECE.

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Abstract

This article describes the education of people with disabilities and/or special educational needs in Greece. From the prevailing situation in Greek education (lack of systematic policies, delays in implementation, absence of clear objectives, petty politics, knowledge-centredness, centralisation of policies), a rhetoric of inclusive education emerges that only superficially aligns with human rights, the demands of the disability movement, and the decisions of international organisations. As Slee (2011) also notes, there is, perhaps, an adaptation of the linguistically expressed policies to the rhetoric of human rights. The contradiction between spoken discourse and implemented policies often serves as a 'buffer' that relieves the demands and needs of social groups. Simultaneously, the state's inability to implement policy, whether due to occasional financial insufficiency or ideological reasons, is highlighted in the redesign of educational structures and the reorientation of education.

Keywords: Co-education, Educational policy, Disabilities, Special education and training, Inclusive education, Greece

1. Introduction

The co-education of individuals with disabilities and/or educational needs at the global and national levels has emerged as a key element in the democratisation of education (Nilholm, 2021; Payà, 2020; Pather, 2019). The introduction of inclusive education was a response to the dominance of the medical-biological model and the separation of educational frameworks for individuals whose characteristics diverged from the dominant learning and eugenic standards of the normalised, effective school (Nilholm, 2021; Pappas et al., 2018). The term inclusive education refers to a dynamic, deconstructive process that challenges the positivist, medical, and biological model of educating individuals with disabilities (Slee, 2011). At its core, the medical model is grounded in the body theme, which promotes a naturalistic approach and views the human body as a pre-social, purely biological entity (Goffman, 2001, pp. 26-27). The concept of normality in this approach is of significant importance and reflects the individual-centredness of responsibility for the 'deficiency' and 'inadequacy' of the biological body (Pather, 2019; Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Stigmatisation and negative emotions accompany this, while moralisation intensifies the humiliation and devaluation that a disabled person experiences as a "contagion" due to their illness (Koutantos, 2000). The individual-centred, deterministic approach of this model fails to embrace the dynamic and transformative social interactions that arise from the encounter between the individual's personal difficulties and the context, and to highlight an "intra-social" interpretation of disability. Educational policy interventions are legitimised by recognising the disabled individual's responsibility and emphasising societal obligations. This involves adapting social structures to integrate individuals better (Payà, 2020; Pappas et al., 2018). Initially, society's response to diversity is shaped by the philanthropic humanist ideology (Areheart, 2008; Barton, 2006; Zoniou-Sideri, 1998) and later by therapeutic approaches (Skidmore, 2004).

In contrast, inclusive education embodies the right to equal access to education, promotes social justice, aims to eliminate social exclusion, and embraces diversity. It reshapes teaching and learning environments in mainstream schools and is grounded in the principle of 'education for all' (Nilholm, 2021; Faragher et al., 2021). The decades following the Warnock Report (1978) and the 1981 Education Act in Britain introduced the terms "special educational needs" instead of "special needs" and "whole school approach", emphasising education that rejects exclusion and differentiates teaching according to students' abilities (Skidmore, 2004). Over the past two decades, the understanding of disability has evolved due to several factors: a) research into how illness is socially constructed, the growing impact of social attitudes and policies towards people with health issues, b) the differentiation between biological and social causes of disability, and c) the acknowledgement of human functioning as multidimensional and influenced by multiple factors (Luckasson, 2002). As a result, the concept has shifted from being primarily a person-centred trait to viewing disability as a social phenomenon rooted in societal causes (Nilholm, 2021; Pather, 2019). Unlike the traditional individual-medical perspective, this approach

emphasises social change rather than focusing solely on individual adaptation and "dogmatic introversion'. Social causes express the functional limitations inherent in disability or incapacity, as well as the roles and purposes expected of an individual within a social context (De Ploy & Gilson, 2004; Oliver, 1996). The model that emerges from these considerations and challenges is the social model. Barnes et al. (1999) note that the social model views special educational needs as a consequence of social structures, closely linked to social, economic, and political issues. The social model shifts the perspective from separating individuals and treating them differently, leading to distinct types of education (mainstreaming and special education and training) and, at the same time, combating the 'labelling' of students and low-level education (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Pappas et al., 2018; Skidmore, 2004). With the introduction of the social model, an attempt is made to shift the focus from the functionality and limitations inherent in disabled individuals to the problems caused by the 'deficient' environment and culture of society. It constitutes a cultural change (Slee, 2011). The social model offers a comprehensive framework that highlights the particular challenges faced by persons with disabilities, including barriers such as inaccessible education, information systems, and work environments, discrimination within health and social services, obstacles in transport and public buildings, and negative stereotypes and stigma in the media. Furthermore, the social model does not deny the importance or value of appropriate individualised intervention for the disabled person, but emphasises the limitations for that person in a society created by non-disabled people.

The social model approach has highlighted co-education as a key issue in the debate (Choi et al., 2020; Goutziamanis & Goutziamani, 2025). It is viewed as a way to shift the culture away from exclusion, which currently denies individuals with disabilities and their families access to educational and social resources. This exclusion is experienced either through the interaction of the person with a disability with 'others' or through the policies implemented in the context of education. At the same time, inclusive education opens up a field of reflection on disability and education. It relates to transparency in policy decisions on education, equal opportunities, and respect for human rights (Slee, 1997).

2. The postmodern context of co-education

Despite the above-mentioned positives of the social model, theorists of co-education and educational policy raise questions about its success in a globalised, competitive, capitalist system. For them, there is a contradiction between the rhetoric of co-education and democratic education for all and the social and school reality experienced by people with disabilities. A reality that is imbued with the principles of neoliberalism and extreme individualistic competition (Kotsias, 2003; Negreponti-Delivani, 2001), as well as uncertainty and risk. This reality recognises the diversity and uniqueness of human existence and the meaning that individuals give to it (Bauman, 2002), confirming that "the modern world is experienced as a world of progress and, with it, an alienated spirit" (Habermas, 1993). "Borders" are more evident than ever. As Bauman (2005) characteristically states, in the modern world, "the border is redrawn with every collection and disposal of waste... it separates the useful product from the 'waste'..." The economy of exclusion of the "outcasts" and those deemed not valuable is more than a reality; it is a system. Through its rational-meritocratic and positivist assessments of social data, society creates socially excluded individuals. Social exclusion and inequality between the privileged and the non-privileged are widening (Beck, 1999; Stefanos & Mitoula, 2003), while the structuring of individuals' field of action further highlights the powers of the culturally dominant (Foucault, 1991).

Furthermore, the co-education of persons with disabilities takes place within a structured environment that is difficult to change and does not only concern its political-ideological approach, but also the dictates of educational policy, which are no longer determined within the narrow confines of national territory, but are directly or indirectly influenced by the broader context of globalised education policy. The elements of national education systems are compared and classified according to structured criteria relating to their effectiveness and success in achieving predetermined educational goals. International organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD help to make education systems comparable by conducting programmes to collect and evaluate learning performance (TIMSS, PIRLS, PISA). School is linked to the labour market, and concepts such as cost and results prevail. Due to this rigid approach in educational policies, society does not view inclusive education as a valid policy or cultural shift. Instead, it is seen merely as an extension of special education and training within the mainstream education framework (Slee, 2011). Theorists and practitioners often do not use the vocabulary of inclusive education to explore the subject in greater depth, but instead use it as an excuse to perpetuate the system (Skidmore, 2004). The discourse differentiates between situations, but classroom practice, teacher training, and education do not liberate the teaching and pedagogy of inclusive education from the shackles of conservatism and the historicity of special education and training. Inclusive education is seen as a continuation of special education and training,

and the transfer of teaching and pedagogical standards from the latter to mainstream schools is often considered necessary. Teachers who have attempted to introduce the new field of inclusive education have based it on the traditional model of special education and training, attempting to meet the new requirements with the same elements, which has led to deadlock and the isolation of individuals with disabilities (Danforth & Naraian, 2015). The restrictive and binding nature of special education and training learning schemes often exaggerates the existing difficulties of individuals with disabilities. It prevents inclusive education from being separated from special education and training (Ifas, 2011).

At the same time, changes in terminology and theoretical analyses have not been incorporated into teaching practice (Norwich, 2000, 2007). Even today, interpretations are still based on references to the medical model and statistical categorisations of the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities. To ensure a person with a disability is included in mainstream education, a diagnostic process is used to determine whether they are suitable for inclusion. The way practitioners use diagnostic criteria indicates the persistence of medical-biological models, as well as the restrictive frameworks that do not refer to liberatory education but to inflexible educational spaces. The standards followed are structured, dominant and imposed on everyone through a process of hyper-socialisation (Allan, 2004). Through 'symbolic violence', criteria are imposed 'arbitrarily' in Bourdieu's sense (1994), and reproduced as legitimised realities. These constitute the cultural crystallisations of the dominant positivist culture through complex ideological processes and through the exclusion of different perspectives on social reality. The diagnostic arbitrariness is reinforced by a value-laden "punitive" system, formal or informal, which creates "normalised" citizens, those who impose and promote it to the socially excluded, who try to define their place in the social space and construct an identity by contrasting the practices of their own group with those imposed as cultural "truth" (Bourdieu, 1994).

Furthermore, co-education continues to shape social inequalities (Giavrimis, 2017), confirming earlier theorising that linked inclusion in special education and training to race, social class, and poverty (Tomlinson, 1981). While schools appear to have depoliticised practices, in reality, they are deeply politicised, social inequalities are naturalised, the pursuit of social justice is minimised, and class inequalities are growing. According to Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (1985), factors such as health, time, money, skills and cooperation with others influence the extent to which individuals can carry out their intentions. At the same time, social class is linked to better education and better health services. According to Benjamin (2002), co-education is "a stereotype ……..for the continuous reproduction of oppressive social relations and the resulting economic inequalities".

As noted earlier, neoliberalism has influenced a new understanding of the educational framework, emphasising concerns about teachers' autonomy, their ability to intervene in education, accountability, and the privatisation of schools (Gewirtz et al., 2009). Teacher accountability, which is associated with greater supervision, the imposition of regulations (sometimes 'punitive'), and the concept of the effectiveness of education systems in relation to learning outcomes, creates conditions of competitiveness and highlights social inequalities in a broader context of globalised education policies (Green, 2010). At the same time, the 'colonisation' of education, and special education and training in particular, by the private sector highlights the inability of education policies to provide equal education for all and the surrender of their obligations to market ideologies. As far as teachers are concerned, adherence to appropriate standards and good practices relieves them of responsibility for failure. However, it takes away their freedom of initiative, which would encourage questioning and redefine the learning and teaching practices of inclusive education (Derrida, 1996). The division of teachers into specialists and non-specialists creates fear and insecurity among the latter about their ability to work with people with disabilities in inclusive education, as well as a transfer of responsibility to the former (Slee, 2011).

Co-education goes beyond reforming education; it is a struggle against failure and social, as well as educational, exclusion (Slee, 2011). Booth and Ainscow (2011) describe inclusive education as creating a sense of belonging for everyone, promoting greater participation of children and adults in learning and community activities, and reducing exclusion, discrimination, and barriers to access and involvement. It involves modifying culture, policies, and practices to ensure equal recognition of the diversity within the student body, connecting education to both local and global contexts, and acknowledging children's right to quality education in their communities. Furthermore, it seeks to enhance schools for staff, parents, and students, promote mutual exchange between schools and their communities, and see inclusion in education as intertwined with social inclusion.

Co-education represents a political and cultural shift, breaking down the traditional conservative boundaries of various educational systems (mainstream versus special) and fostering an environment rooted in equality, social justice, solidarity, and appreciation for diversity (Ballard, 1997). This shift requires a fundamental overhaul of educational policies, including reforms in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches (Skidmore, 2004). The

narrowly restrictive interpretation of inclusive education as applying only to persons with disabilities threatens to undermine the application of its principles to the entire student population. To overturn established practices, which are usually imposed tacitly or applied customarily, leaving the whole process of inclusive education as a superficial approach, with a basic orientation towards rejection or, as Bernstein (1996 in Slee, 2001), as a process of political absorption. The questions that need to be asked in educational policy concern the processes of deconstructing the monopolies of cognitive areas and the enclosure of knowledge, equality policies, curricula, assessment and educational practices, with the issues of equality in each of these elements being of central importance for productive pedagogy, as well as questions concerning the autonomy and cognitive and social development of teachers as facilitators and supporters of co-education (Allan, 2003).

The State of Co-education, Special Education, and training in Greece

The need for special educational treatment of persons with disabilities can be traced back to the time of Kapodistrias's administration in Greece, who, through institutional approaches, cared for the orphans of the fighters of 1821 (Stassinopoulos, 1991). Through its legislation, in the decades until 2000, the state only recognised difficulties in cognitive, emotional and psychomotor skills that were most apparent in society (e.g. 'mentally retarded', "maladjusted"), "eliminating" all other disabilities and difficulties from its policies. At the same time, the fragmentation and lack of good organisation and coordination of Greek education for people with disabilities, references to specific cases of people with disabilities, the clear separation of their education in a different educational context and the serious intrusion of the private sector into their education confirm the ideological prejudice of the Greek state and society towards persons with disabilities, the power of social conformism, but also the state's inability to regulate social needs in a structured manner. The direct consequence of the above policies was the social and educational exclusion of persons with disabilities (Zoniou-Sideri, 1998; Kalantzis, 1984; Stassinopoulos, 1991). Society and, by extension, the state stigmatised the perceived unproductiveness of persons with disabilities by associating disability with feelings of "inferiority" and the consequent "deviation" from the normality of the rest of the working population, legitimising their marginalisation and social exclusion (Zoniou-Sideri, 2008).

This educational policy continued until the 1980s, when the demands of the disability movement, international developments in human rights in previous years and the conceptualisation of disability by international organisations influenced Greek educational policy towards people with disabilities and prompted it to take tentative steps to recognise the need for the state to take responsibility for their 'integration' into education. This was reinforced by changes in the political landscape and the rise to power of the socialists, which brought new social forces and demands to the fore. However, developments remain at a superficial legislative level, with many laws slow to be implemented (the relevant presidential decrees are not being passed) or never implemented (Lambropoulou & Panteliadou, 2000; Charoupia, 2011). Meanwhile, the separation of persons with disabilities from the rest of the student population in education is clear, and the two types of education (mainstream and special) operate in parallel, without any particular communication between them. The delay in implementation and the separation of the student population exacerbate social and educational stigma. Not all students with disabilities are included in the education system, some because of the stigma that exists in society and others because of the noncompulsory nature of inclusion or recourse to private education.

In the last decades, following the passing of Law 2101/1992, which enshrines the right of persons with disabilities to education (Articles 2, 28, 29), the detailed programmes of special education and training (Presidential Decree 301/1996) and the claims of persons with disabilities, Law 2817/2000 was enacted. Law 2817/2000 improved Greece's special education by establishing an inclusive system with free public education, assessment, counselling, and support services, such as sign language interpretation and Braille lessons. It also recognises the compulsory education for persons with disabilities and special educational needs, aligning with mainstream standards. Co-education is offered as an option, not compulsory, and does not specify the exact approach. However, the categorisation and terminology for persons with disabilities (e.g. vision problems, hearing problems, orthopaedic defects) and the more general term 'special educational needs' is used, thus separating and grading the concept of special education and training in relation to the individuals to whom it is addressed. It also provides for the creation of an autonomous Special Education Department at the Pedagogical Institute, with the aim of training and specialising teachers in special education and training. An important provision is that parents have the right to choose the appropriate educational setting for their child after diagnosis and assessment. To this end, the services work with parents to inform them about the appropriate educational structure and propose a specific Individualised Education Programme (IEP). (Ministry of Education Circular G6/10235/2002). In line with the above, the current detailed programmes and the Interdisciplinary Unified Framework of Study Programmes for compulsory education, which were created after the passing of Law

2817/2000 and the curriculum programms for special education and training of PD 301/1996, reference is made to "ensuring equal opportunities and learning possibilities for all students" (Government Gazette 303/13/3/03 vol. B, art. 2, par. c) and points out that persons with disabilities need to be given "special care ... for their integration" both in Special education and training, which is defined "as an integral part of General Education", and in mainstream schools (Government Gazette 303/13/3/03 vol. B, art. 2, par. c). The basic principle referred to in the detailed curricula is the removal of barriers to the education of persons with disabilities in their neighbourhood schools, such as accessibility, teaching materials, and resources, which are the responsibility of the entire school community. Of course, this is conditional on the evaluation and cooperation of the school and the Diagnosis, Evaluation and Support Centres (KDAU) (Government Gazette 303/13/3/03 vol. B, art. 3). Presidential Decree 301/1996 establishes a framework for the Special Education Curriculum, which is followed by Special Education and Training Schools. In 2004, the Pedagogical Institute created detailed curricula for six categories of students with special educational needs: a) those with severe or moderate-mild intellectual disabilities, b) students with hearing problems, c) students with visual impairments, d) students with motor disabilities, e) students with autism, and f) students with multiple disabilities. For each category, either specialised curricula were developed or existing mainstream education curricula were adjusted or modified to meet their specific needs.

This law continues to be characterised by a mainstream approach to educational policy, without changing the policies of segregation and categorisation (Zoniou-Sideri, 2000). Examples that highlight this concern include the inability to define the terms of the law clearly, the implementation of Integration Departments (formerly Special Classes) (multiple operational problems, emphasis only on learning, absence of social integration strategies, stigmatised 'space' within the school), the vagueness of the application of cooperative teaching in the mainstream classroom, as well as the difficulties in cooperation between mainstream and special education and training staff, and the fact that (Vlachou & Zoniou-Sideri, 2011. Zoniou-Sideri, 2004). At the same time, Law 2817/2000 persists in organisational and administrative procedures based on a bureaucratic philosophy that do not offer persons with disabilities the option of equal integration into education and society as a whole.

The spread of special education and training is shown in Table 3, while about special classes, the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT) reports that the number of pupils in special primary school classes amounted to 10,350 (759 classes) in 2000/01, 11,044 (834 classes) in 2001/02, 12,380 (971 classes) in 2002/03, 11,889 (968 classes) in 2003/04, 13,188 (1,128 classes) in 2004/05 and 13,618 (1,215 classes) in 2005/06.

Table 3. Special Education and Training Data 2000-2008

YEAR	SCHOOL UNITS.	STAFF	STUDENTS
2000	201	1194	4411
2001-2002	20	1226	4320
2002-2003	200	1195	4337
2003-2004	209	1322	4355
2004-2005	261	1827	5397
2005-2006	287	2091	5842
2006-2007	285	2172	5828
2007-2008	299	2364	6451

Source: Data processed by the Hellenic Statistical Authority from 2000 to 2008

About the implementation of Law 2817/2000 and the situation in special education and training at that time, the Greek Ombudsman (2008) points out that: "...the provisions of the law have not been implemented to a satisfactory degree, due to the high requirements for the operation of the planned structures and support services, the limited availability of funds, the lack of availability of special education and training teachers and other objective conditions" and ".....parallel support was not implemented in practice either due to insufficient funding or due to the inability of the competent Education Directorates to find special education and training teachers available for this purpose. Thus, it was common for approved parallel support not to be implemented at all, to be provided on a partial basis or with significant delay, or to be replaced by the placement of students in integration classes."

Law 3699/2008 improves Law 2817/2000 by creating a comprehensive education framework. It defines Special education as services for students with disabilities or special needs, aiming to foster acceptance, support integration, and promote active involvement. The government commits to providing access and infrastructure aligned with the European "Design for All" initiative. According to Law 3699/2008, students with disabilities and/or special educational needs are defined as "those who, for the entire duration or a specific period of their

school life, experience significant learning difficulties due to sensory, intellectual, cognitive, developmental problems, psychological and neuropsychological disorders which, according to an interdisciplinary assessment, affect the process of school adaptation and learning." Beyond the classifications set by Law 2817/2000, the categorization of persons with disabilities and special educational needs also encompasses students with chronic incurable diseases, attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity, mental disorders, multiple disabilities, delinquent behavior resulting from abuse, parental neglect, abandonment, or domestic violence, as well as individuals with one or more intellectual abilities and talents that significantly surpass expectations for their age (Article 3, paragraph 3). The clarification of some instances that created confusion in Law 2817/2000 and the inclusion of "gifted" children among persons with special educational needs facilitate the work of all bodies involved in special education and training (KEDDY, IPD, Hospitals, SMEAE, Insurance Funds, etc.) and guide parents in seeking support. The regulation on issues relating to special education and training in secondary education, and to the recognition of graduates of university special education and training structures (Article 25), is positive.

From 2008 to 2013, there was no new legislation on special education. Then, with Law 4186/2013, the Greek state introduced amendments concerning vocational secondary schools and home-based education, which is not compulsory to be provided by special education and training teachers. Law 4115/2013 introduced the Diagnostic Educational Assessment and Support Committee, which operates at the level of mainstream education schools. The Special Education and Training School Unit is transformed into a Support Centre for a network of mainstream education schools. Law 4318/2016 (Article 81, paragraph 6) defines co-education as a core pillar of Special Education, promoting equal opportunities for all students and emphasising the need to raise awareness of human rights and diversity in mainstream education schools. Finally, on 1 February 2017, the new Draft Law "Regulation of matters concerning the State Certificate of Language Proficiency, the National Library of Greece and other provisions" was passed, in which Chapter C, Article 11, specifies the number of persons with disabilities who can be included in school classes, which can range from 1 to 4 depending on the severity of the disability, the existence of an Integration Department and the number of 'typical' students. The ratio of students with disabilities to other students is not the only criterion for inclusive education. Differentiating factors in Greece's inclusive education include unequal service provision for different disabilities and inclusion based on category or diagnosis, as per laws such as 3369/2008 and 4186/2013.

Table 4. Special Education and Training Data 2014-2022

YEAR	SCHOOL UNITS.	STAFF	STUDENTS
2013-2014	388	3120	8892
2018-2019	477	4214	11485
2021-2022	524	5.461	12.981

Source: Data processed by the Hellenic Statistical Authority from 2008 to 2014

The data in Table 4 show an increasing trend towards the expansion of special education and training structures, while according to Ref. No. Official Memorandum /Δ6/ 20-7-2015 of the Directorate of Special Education and Training of the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs: "the number of integration departments established in primary education amounts to 1,870, all of which operated, provided that the required number of students was reached, while the number of integration classes established in secondary education amounts to 278, all of which also operated after the required number of students was reached ." Also, during the 2015-16 school year, "of the total 4,068 applications for parallel support in primary education, 4,031 were approved, of which 2,639 were renewals and 1,392 were new. In secondary education, out of a total of 797 applications for parallel support, 776 were approved, of which 505 were renewals, and 271 were new applications. About Special Support Staff and nurses respectively for 2015-16, 610 SSP positions and 150 school nurses were approved (Eurydice, 2016a).

Of course, the implementation of parallel support, which is presented as the only model of co-education2, is usually delayed, not widely disseminated, implemented by teachers who often lack the necessary experience, and replaced by integration departments (Greek Ombudsman, 2009).

Currently, the basic university education for special education and training teachers is offered by the Department of Special Education at the University of Thessaly and the Department of Educational and Social Policy at the University of Macedonia, which provides a specialisation in special educational needs. At the postgraduate level, several departments in Greece offer specialisation in special education. It should be noted that at the undergraduate level, Education Departments offer one or two introductory courses in special education and training. At the same time, only two university departments have organised thematic modules on the co-education of persons with disabilities. The above applies to primary education, because in secondary

education, there is no organised education or training for any of its specialisations. As an example, we can mention that for secondary education teachers, the two most prominent Greek universities (EKPA and APTH) and for subjects that play a primary role in our education system (literature, mathematics, physics), the shortcomings that exist in teaching subjects related to people with disabilities and special education and training are significant, since only the philology departments offer a satisfactory number of courses (related to pedagogy and psychology), which, however, are taken interdepartmentally from the co-located Pedagogy Departments. Furthermore, according to data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority (2007), special education and training in secondary education have not developed to the extent they could and should, in line with primary education, so that persons with disabilities can have a comprehensive educational path through their teenage years. There are no established in-service training programs for special education and secondary education staff, including substitutes and hourly workers. Law 3699/2008 mandated the creation of teacher training colleges, but this mandate was never implemented. Currently, the only training opportunities for secondary school teachers are entrance exams to university departments of special education and training and postgraduate studies, both of which have limited capacity. Therefore, the training of all teachers in modern Greek education on special education and training issues is based on private initiative by the teachers themselves (Zoniou-Sideri et al., 2005). It should be noted here that, according to research conducted in Greece, the education and training of teachers plays an important role in their attitude towards inclusive education and the skills they acquire (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Georgiadis et al., 2007; Vlachou, 1997), while it seems that teachers' experience from their contact with special education and training and people with disabilities also plays a role (Angelides, 2004; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Katsiyannis et al., 1995; Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 2006).

The Greek Ombudsman for Special Education and Training highlights that the issues identified are related to the system to: "serious understaffing, the delayed start and shortening of the school year ...", "inadequate educational support for students with disabilities and/or special educational needs attending mainstream schools (lack of appropriately adapted educational programmes and teaching materials, inadequate implementation of established special support measures, such as parallel support and attendance in integration classes, etc.) ...", "chronic underfunding of the EAE and inadequacy of available resources ..." (Greek Ombudsman, 2015).

Since 2015, Greece's Special Education and Training has undergone significant reforms, institutional changes, and systematic efforts aligned with national strategies and European guidelines to promote the full inclusion and integration of students with disabilities. A key milestone was the establishment of inclusive education principles, reinforced by Law 4368/2016, building on Law 3699/2008. However, later reforms have caused concern. In 2025, Law 5224/2025 was enacted, bringing significant changes to Special Education, including reallocating positions from Mainstream Education to bolster SE. This move was criticised as an internal resource reallocation that did not significantly increase staffing levels. Although 1,900 new organic positions were planned for KEDASY (Centres for Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counselling and Support) and EDY (Interdisciplinary Support Committees), this redistribution was offset by an equal number of abolitions in Mainstream Education. This has led to the view that the changes do not address the actual needs of Special Education. Teachers' organisations emphasised that the law worsens underfunding and fosters a 'patchwork' approach to meeting needs. The 2025 legislation proposed establishing new Inclusion Departments and allowing for a second Parallel Support teaching position, in response to long-standing requests from special education and training agencies. However, these provisions coexist with high student-to-class ratios and a restructuring of school nurse roles, leading to conflicting expectations about the actual implementation of inclusion. In the broader educational landscape, reforms planned for 2022–2025, as detailed in national educational strategies, integrate special education and inclusion into a framework encompassing evaluation policies, educator professional development, and the organisation of the public school system.

3. Discussion

Since the inception of the legislative framework, early special education and training, as well as modern co-education, have relied on inconsistent, poorly supported organisational structures (Pappas et al., 2018; Goutziamanis & Goutziamani, 2025). Administrative decisions are influenced by Greece's centralised education system and the state's neglect of systemic issues (Pappas et al., 2018; Nilholm, 2021). The medical-biological model of early special education, which emphasises the deficiencies of individuals with disabilities and places responsibility for these difficulties on them, has directly shaped sporadic educational policies and the development of private initiatives, thereby contributing to implementation (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Pather, 2019). According to Merton's (1968) terminology, disability can be seen as a form of anomie, a contradiction with the dominant social order that must be addressed to achieve functionality and adaptation (Koutantos, 2000;

Pappas et al., 2018; Pather, 2019). This is reflected in the language of legislation and references to "individuals deviating from the norm," "abnormal," or "retarded," which serve to legitimise marginalisation and endorse a naturalistic approach to disability. Such language embodies and clearly reflects the Greek state's ideological and political stance toward persons with disabilities. This framework aligns with the pathologising view of disability, where the social system remains unquestioned, and individuals are expected to adapt, thereby justifying institutional marginalisation and symbolic violence against people with disabilities (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Bourdieu, 1991; Oliver, 1996; Goodley, 2017).

Greece's accession to the EU and the general proposal by social partners and scientific organisations for the co-education of students with disabilities alongside the rest of the student population led to the passing of Laws 2817/2000 and, in particular, 3699/2008, which breathed new life into educational policy for people with disabilities (Payà, 2020; Pappas et al., 2018). In modern Greek education, however, there is an apparent contradiction between the democratic rhetoric of the state's official statements on special and inclusive education and the practices followed by teachers in everyday educational practice, as well as the educational policies implemented (Goutziamanis & Goutziamani, 2025). Although the state's official discourse promotes education for all, this is not reflected in actual practice within the educational system. Thus, legislative texts and official state documents refer to inclusive education (laws, APS, DEPPS), but in terms and conditions of mainstream education. They mention diversity and how to "deal" with it, but the practices do not really demonstrate how it is incorporated into teaching. The typical alignment with European policies constitutes a form of rhetorical compliance, in which integration functions more as an institutional narrative than a structural reorganisation of education, obscuring the unequal power relations that continue to shape educational practice (Slee, 2018; Ainscow, 2020; Payà, 2020). Categorisation and segregation persist, with the inclusion of persons with disabilities relying on assessment procedures. These procedures are not aimed at improving the regulation of inclusive education for individuals, but rather at deciding when to implement it. Classifying individuals based on their abilities and skills primarily helps them fit into a structured educational setting. In this context, assessment serves as a sociological tool of power, classification, and normalisation, reinforcing school hierarchies and perpetuating educational exclusion under the pretence of neutrality (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Foucault, 1991; Florian, 2019); (Pappas et al., 2018).

The concept of necessity and change in the school environment is linked to individuals with disabilities, not to the broader need for change and reorganisation of school education. An educational framework where the effectiveness and accountability of participants are the dominant components of the new school in the postmodern era. In the postmodern era, the individual's choices, which appear to be unlimited with the use of the internet and ICT, lead to a dead end, as the effectiveness and accountability imposed by the context overemphasise ability and behavioural standards. Therefore, as school becomes more intense, tolerance for disability and diversity will diminish (Allan, 2004; Choi et al., 2020; Nilholm, 2021). Simultaneously, a principle of student population homogeneity is gaining prominence within the school context. In Greece, schools and curricula largely stay unchanged, with only superficial or conceptual modifications made to align with inclusive education principles. Instead of adapting the school environment to students with disabilities, the focus is on encouraging these students to adapt to the existing school environment and curricula of Mainstream Education, emphasising individual responsibility. An education for all means adapting the education system to students' specific characteristics. The shifting of responsibility onto the individual reflects neoliberal educational discourse, in which diversity becomes a management problem rather than a starting point for social transformation (Ball, 2017; Goutziamanis & Goutziamani, 2025; Pappas et al., 2018).

However, the current education system appears impersonal and neutral towards both students and teachers. Teachers and students are treated the same way under the obligations and rights that derive from the regulatory and normative model of a mainstream education system. School appears to be an objective, neutral, and meritocratic institution, where the achievement of its objectives by individuals is essential for their success both at the end of their school career and in securing a significant position in the labour market. The assessments of teachers and students, the selective processes of education, and the accountability of its members constitute a rational, instrumental framework that rejects emotionalism and integrates education into an objective, technological process. The apparent neutrality of education conceals its class and social character, as the school functions as a key mechanism for reproducing social hierarchy and legitimising inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Furthermore, when educational policies neglect issues of co-education, especially in teacher training, it is natural that pedagogical methods and teachers' attitudes in mainstream schools preserve past divisions. This makes it difficult for them to adapt to new human rights imperatives. The recent economic crisis in Greece has

also led to reductions or eliminations of training programs, further hindering progress. Teachers do not receive in-service training, except in a fragmented manner, mainly through European programmes, and their only recourse is the private sector and their own financial investment in self-education. The absence of systematic training turns inclusion into an individual responsibility of educators, rather than a collective professional and institutional goal, thereby reinforcing educational insecurity and professional exclusion (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016).

Exclusion from inclusive education affects both people with disabilities and teachers who cannot participate. Teachers' understanding of inclusive education is crucial for fostering a fair environment that respects the rights and needs of every child, regardless of gender, ability, ethnicity, socio-economic background, or race. The above factors signal an increase in social inequalities and the establishment of social exclusion and marginalisation (Allan, 2004). Individuals are left to face the responsibilities attributed to them for failing to meet the requirements of the education system, which deliberately reproduces both the dominant ideology and the social hierarchy. Education plays a central role in maintaining social hierarchy by reinforcing inequalities through assessment and selection. Low socioeconomic and uninsured groups face social exclusion, putting them at a disadvantage compared to wealthier individuals. Education serves as a mechanism of social reproduction, in which existing inequalities are not remedied but normalised through institutional evaluation and selection practices (Gillborn, 2015; Nevill et al., 2023).

The state's timid educational policy, welfare reduction, and privatisation are turning disability exploitation into a "permanent enterprise," highlighting social inequalities in a market economy, as Apple (2001) discusses. Factors such as health, time, money (Ajzen, 1985) and social class are associated with the provision of better education (Giavrimis, 2022). Privatising support transforms inclusion into a commodity, exacerbating social divisions and disconnecting education from its public and social functions (Verger et al., 2016).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, given the current situation in Greek education (lack of systematic policies, delays in implementation, absence of clear objectives, petty politics, knowledge-centredness, centralisation of policies), there appears to be a rhetoric of co-education that only ostensibly responds to human rights, the demands of the disability movement and the decisions of international organisations. As Slee et al. (1998) point out, there is, rather, an adaptation of verbally expressed policies to the rhetoric of human rights. The contradiction between what is said and what is done often acts as a "buffer" to the demands and needs of specific groups in society. At the same time, however, it highlights the state's inability to implement a policy, either due to inadequacy, mainly economic in some cases, or due to ideology, to redesign educational structures and reorient education. The disparity between speech and action highlights both administrative shortcomings and ideological opposition to a fundamental reorientation of education toward true inclusivity (Slee, 2018; Smyth et al., 2014). The co-education policy should promote fairness for people with disabilities, ensuring unhindered access to resources and taking into account their cultural experiences. It should also include practical resources for planning and implementation of education, while addressing conflicts among interest groups over accountability, performance, and quality.

5. References

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