

VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF DEAF TEACHERS' ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore deaf teachers' views and experiences on the matter of inclusion. Furthermore, the research aims to explore the ways in which disability is defined by the deaf teachers as well as the ways they perceive inclusive education.

The teachers that participated in the research are twenty (20) in number and the criteria used for their participation are the disability of deafness and their labour status in Greek Special Education Schools.

The following methodological approach is a qualitative research and the semi-structured interview has been chosen as a methodological tool. The interviews were video recorded. The languages used during the interview sections were the Greek Sign Language or the Greek oral language, accordingly to the participants' choice. The data analysis was made with the method of content analysis and the main conclusions were the following: a) it was realised that teachers have little knowledge of the theoretical framework of inclusion and the way in which inclusive classes function, b) the obtained knowledge of inclusion comes mostly through teachers' interaction with some of their deaf pupils, c) it seems that the participants emphasized their opinions only on the inclusive education of deaf students for which they believed that it is difficult to be applied and d) some teachers define disability with terms used in the medical model of disability and some of the participants seemed to exclude deaf people from the social group of disabled people.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND DEAFNESS

When trying to comprehend the exact meaning of inclusion, we usually limit ourselves with terms of simple participation of the disabled students in the general education system that each country follows. However, inclusion reaches beyond simple participation. All the students will have to actively participate in all the activities of the general school and the school needs to be in a position to instill feelings of teamwork, not isolation, to all its members. The creation of an inclusive mentality requires constant effort, alertness and continuous criticism on the current conditions, in order to create a democratic framework (Mittler 2000).

Deaf children's attending general schools is not an innovative trend that appeared in the last few years. Many experts supported deaf children attending general schools, whereas others questioned its usefulness and insisted on deaf children attending special schools for deaf students (Moore & Kluwin 1986; Cole 1989).

The advantages of inclusive education for deaf students are considered to be the sense of justice the deaf students get when they receive training with non disabled children, the independence to choose hearing friends and the

opportunity to exploit their communicational skills (Byrnes, Sigafoos, Richards & Brown 2002). Antia (2002) and Powers (2002) mention that inclusion is not limited to placing deaf students within a general class. It requires providing all the rights that deaf students have. In other words, it is not sufficient to create capable educational conditions; we have to comprehend inclusion as a system of values.

At this point a question rises: Is the general school able to cultivate and promote the specific characteristics of the deaf group, such as language, culture and the identity of the deaf community? Those who oppose inclusive education claim that only a special school can cultivate all of the above.

The definition of the disability and, by extension the way we see disabled people is critical, since it greatly affects the way we interact and the expectations that we have from the specific group (Barton 2003).

The influence of the medical model of the disability has created the conviction that the disability is experienced individually (Oliver 1983). According to the medical model, disability is understood as a condition that requires treatment (Barnes & Mercer 2003). This specific conviction has forced society to limit itself in caring for the disabled, while the way the disabled are viewed by society depends on individual conscience (Oliver & Barnes 1998).

According to the social model, disability does not mean deficiency. The social model of disability focuses on the social oppression of disability and on society's failure to accept the disabled people's diversity, thus excluding them without reason from equal participation in social life (Oliver 1990; Barnes & Mercer 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of the present research is to promote the views and the experiences of deaf teachers regarding inclusive education and the conceptual approach of the disability. In order to achieve the goal of the research the following questions have been asked:

1. What are the views and the experiences of deaf teachers regarding inclusive education?
 - 1^a. Are their views on inclusion different when it concerns deaf students?
2. What are the interpreting views of the deaf teachers concerning the disability?
 - 2^a. Does the conceptual definition of the disability by the participants affect their views on inclusive education?

For the present qualitative research the descriptive methodological approach of the subject was chosen (Bryman 2004). The research tool used was the semi-structured interview, whereas the data analysis was made with the method of content analysis (Wellington 2000; Bryman 2004).

The interviews were videotaped and later transcribed. The average duration of the interviews was approximately forty (40) minutes. The participants communicated in either sign language or Greek oral language, depending on the wishes of each participant. After the transcription of the interviews, it was deemed necessary to have the transcripts of each interview checked by a certified Greek sign language interpreter, so that the translation of the sign language into the Greek language were precise, without room for misinterpretations of the participants' words. Next, the analysis of the

completed text of each subject followed and the analysis categories were created, according to issues in question.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the present research are twenty (20) deaf teachers who work at the special primary and secondary education schools for deaf children in the prefecture of Attiki. The sampling technique used was the snowball method (Bryman 2004). Out of the twenty (20) teachers that participated in the research, nine were men and eleven (11) were women. Eighteen (18) of them come from hearing families and two of them come from deaf families. Nine teachers have stated that they were born deaf, whereas eleven (11) stated that they are prelingually deaf. Nine teachers have attended both special and general schools, six teachers have only attended a special school for the deaf and five teachers have attended only a general school. Nineteen (19) participants hold a University degree and one of them has graduated from a two-year Academy for teachers. Out of the nineteen (19) participants who completed their studies in a University, one holds a doctorate. Fourteen (14) participants have their own class that they teach in a special school, whereas six participants work as assistants of the hearing teachers in a special school.

Finally, seven participants have been working as teachers from six to ten years, seven participants over ten years and six participants from one to five years.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The teachers' knowledge on the theoretical inclusive approach of education appears to be fragmented and based solely on the personal education experiences. By carefully studying the research data one can see that most teachers regard inclusion more as *integration*, i.e. as the actual placement of disabled children in a general school. All the teachers agree on the institution of inclusion and on the following prerequisites for its promotion in general schools: a) the necessary material and technical infrastructure, b) manning with specialized personnel (speech therapists, interpreters, special teachers, etc), and c) the existence of inclusion classes apart from the general class.

However, as far as the education of deaf children is concerned, they claim that inclusion does not function for everybody, because it depends on the learning abilities of the deaf students, on the additional education of the teachers, on the knowledge of sign language, on the existence of an inclusion class and on the presence of at least two deaf children in the general class so they can communicate and feel safe.

The majority of the deaf teachers believe that the goal of inclusive education for deaf students is their learning development and their socialization. Five of the participating teachers also consider the regularization of the deaf students a goal and one of them claims that the goals apply to all the students.

Maintaining the language identity of the deaf students seems to be the predominant subject within inclusive education, according to the teachers. According to them, the deaf student "gets lost" in an oral environment. However, the teachers who attended general schools believe that they progressed; despite the fact that they had to deal with many difficulties due to oral teaching and that attending a general school helped them later in their

adult life. Nevertheless, socially and psychologically they would have felt better in a school for deaf students. The same opinion was expressed by other deaf participants in researches, who, according to Power and Hyde (2002), stated that the general school managed to "prepare them for life".

It is easy to understand why deaf students prefer to attend a special school if we take under consideration the inclusive practices that are being implemented in the general schools. Very often the deaf students are denied their language rights; this deprives them of access to curriculum and to social experiences (Brennan 2003). The insufficient use of sign language and the absence of interpreters in inclusive education of deaf students seem to be significant inhibitors to the creation of a positive attitude of the participants towards inclusion. The goal of inclusion is not to eliminate the linguistic characteristics of the deaf students, but to implement programs for the learning of both languages within the general school. The implemented strategies should ensure access to the curriculum and the natural environment. They should also be in a position to develop the communication of the disabled students (Brennan 2003).

Socialization of the deaf students is a critical issue when it comes to their inclusive education, because the isolation risk is great. The research participants who have attended a general school have stated that several times they felt isolated and cut off from their hearing classmates. This sense of separation is a common feeling amongst deaf students when found amidst groups of hearing people (Stinson, Liu, Saur & Long 1996). Many times the students feel lonely because of their diversity in relation to the hearing students and wish for the presence of other deaf children so they can experience friendship and easy communication (Byrnes, Sigafos, Rickards & Brown 2002). Quite possibly, this is the reason why three teachers participating in the research believe that the formation of a group of deaf students is a prerequisite in order for them to attend a general school.

According to Power and Hyde (2002), the learning development of the students is not interwoven with their socialization. They mention that a high percentage of deaf children attending general schools were socially limited, even though their learning development was easily comparable to the development of their hearing classmates.

Regarding the learning development of the deaf students, the teachers believe that, under the right conditions, general schools can bring about positive results in the development of the students. The conditions have to do with the structure and function of a general school manned with specialized personnel, with individualized curricula and with the adequate material and technical infrastructure.

In addition, the participants agree that the role of the general class teachers is also very decisive. Many teachers agree that the difficulty of teaching deaf children consists of finding methods to promote their participation in activities and to develop their communication skills (Powers 2002).

Another issue of inclusive education for deaf children that greatly concerns the participants is the shaping of an identity for the deaf children in the general school. We need to ask ourselves how "self-image" is shaped, how social development and relationships of the deaf children are formed when they are the only non hearing students in the school (Leigh 1999). It is worth mentioning the words of a participating teacher:

The truth is that when I was at the hearing school I did not know who I was, I was confused... When I started spending time with deaf people, I began to recognize myself, to understand who I was...

The factors that contribute in the deaf person's identity shaping, according to Ridgeway (1997), are related to the degree and duration of interaction of deaf people in a hearing environment, to the ability to access the history, the language and the culture of the deaf and to the communication with deaf adults or people of the same age. All the factors mentioned above were also stressed by the participants in the current study.

The increased number of deaf students attending general schools in the last decades stresses the need to discuss the specific issues and to promote the double identity.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF THE DISABILITY

Thirteen teachers (13) defined the disability as a deficiency or a functional limitation, as described by the medical model which emphasizes the pathology and the diagnosis of the disability (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare 1999). Nonetheless, six of the teachers do not consider deafness a disability, since they bear no obvious indication of disability and they do not consider themselves disabled. One deaf teacher in particular stated:

Deaf people are able bodied. You can't see the deafness. The people that need assistance in order to move are disabled, not the deaf...

In contrast to those who follow the medical model of the approach on deafness, which views deafness as a deficiency, the cultural approach of deafness recognizes the deaf group as a different cultural and linguistic group (Ridgeway 1997). Most of the participants appear to consider the disabled students as people that are lacking in several levels of life. This is why they differentiate deaf people from the overall group of disabled people. The above attitude of the deaf teachers affects their views on inclusion and it seems that they are mainly concerned with issues that weigh heavily on the deaf students (language, socialization, learning development, identity).

CONCLUSIONS

Through analyzing the data it became evident that most teachers see inclusion as placing disabled students in general schools, with the fundamental goal to achieve the learning development of the students and to a lesser degree their social integration to the non disabled population. Furthermore, the definition of inclusion by the participants coincides with the inclusion practices implemented in Greek general schools. There were only two teachers that consider inclusion as the right to education. In addition, all the participants, each in their own way, believe that inclusion mostly concerns the disabled students that are able to learn.

Most teachers (12) appear to have a positive outlook on the inclusive education of the disabled students, but also insist on several prerequisites. In general these prerequisites are related to the abilities of the disabled students and to the function of the school structure. A significant part of the participants (9) believe that inclusion is a non functioning educational choice for deaf students, although they have a positive attitude towards inclusive education for students with other kinds of disabilities. The majority of teachers stated that the existent general schools provide deaf students opportunities for

higher learning development than the special schools. It also becomes obvious that most teachers (19) define disability as it is described by the medical model. It is worth mentioning that most teachers believe that deaf people fall into the disabled category, although six teachers disagreed.

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