

International Encyclopedia of Rehabilitation

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This publication of the Center for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange is supported by funds received from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research of the U.S. Department of Education under grant number H133A050008. The opinions contained in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of CIRRIE or the Department of Education.

Special Education: What do Greek Teachers Know about Learning Disabilities, Autism, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder?

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Abstract

Teachers are often asked to participate in the diagnostic process and it is essential that they are knowledgeable about the different types of special educational needs (SEN). Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore Greek teachers' knowledge of learning disabilities, autism, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The participants were 229 primary schoolteachers aged 25 to 59 years old (mean age = 41 years and 8 months), 95 men and 134 women. The 66 special needs teachers and the 163 general teachers completed three questionnaires measuring their knowledge of each type of SEN. It was found that teachers know more about learning disabilities followed by autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder – regardless of whether they were special needs or general teachers. The findings indicate that it is necessary to offer specialized training to teachers about each type of SEN.

Introduction

The inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream settings constitutes a trend that has prevailed in many countries in the last two decades (Booth and Ainscow 1998; Vislie 2003). These developments are partly due to the Salamanca Statement of the United Nations (Unesco 1994), which placed great emphasis on the education of children with SEN in mainstream schools, discouraging simultaneously the placement of these children in special classes or special schools. However, despite the efforts that were made internationally, Vlachou (2004) pointed out that the process of inclusion often meets difficulties, obstacles, and contradictions that lead to insufficient adjustments and not full inclusion. The teacher-related variables that influence their attitudes towards inclusion are contact or experience with students with SEN and knowledge about SEN (Janney, Snell, Beers and Raynes 1995; Leatherman and Niemeyer 2005; LeRoy and Simpson 1996). It has also been found that postgraduate training, which increases knowledge of SEN, can enhance positive attitudes towards inclusion (Dickens-Smith 1995; Leyser and Tappendorf 2001; Van-Reusen et al. 2000).

In Greece, inclusion faces many practical problems despite the existence of the corresponding regulations. Until recently, in Greece there were only a few “special classes” in some mainstream schools throughout the country. These 15 classes were founded originally in 1985 and aimed at promoting the inclusion of a broad range of children with “learning disabilities” in mainstream primary schools. Students with learning disabilities were the ones whose access to the general classroom was limited due to short- or long-terms problems in reading and writing or maths. Each special

class included at least eight students with severe or mild learning disabilities and less often students with severe disabilities that were placed there after written consent from their parents (Avramidis and Kalyva 2007). It is important at this point to emphasize that special classes in Greece operated differently to most western countries. Vlachou (2006) considers that the term “inclusion class” best describes the way that the particular services were operating.

There is no systematic review and evaluation of the aforementioned special education provisions, partly because the operational guidelines that came from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs changed regularly (Efstathiou 2003). This resulted often to deprivation of access to special provisions for children with special educational needs and their co-instruction with typically developing peers. One of the most recent laws that was voted in 2000 (2817/2000 - Government of Greece 2000) renamed “special classes” to “inclusion classes”, reflecting thus the increased emphasis that was placed on the practice of inclusion. The specific law introduced the design and development of individualised educational plans for students with SEN, who must be incorporated into the mainstream curriculum with the support of trained teaching staff. It is the first time that it is specified that students with SEN must be trained in the general classes where they belong, while attendance of the inclusion class is limited to lesser hours per week (no more than 10). It has been estimated that since the implementation of the law, 70% of students with SEN have been placed in more than 1,000 primary schools that now have inclusion classes while the remaining 30% attends some special school (Stefa 2001; Zoniou-Sideri, Karagianni, Deropoulou-Derou and Spandagou 2005).

Although the recognition of the right of each student with SEN to attend mainstream schooling is an important sign of progress, this reform has not been received without criticism. More specifically, Zoniou-Sideri and her colleagues (2005) have argued that the model of “inclusion classes” is just a political act that does not influence the general function of the primary schools, resulting to the perpetuation of discrimination and stigmatization. The continuous emphasis that is placed on the deficits of the student with SEN and the therapeutic approach pose an obstacle for the institutional reform that is necessary for genuine inclusion to take place (Vlachou, 2006).

In addition to the concerns that have been voiced, it is now evident that the recent developments have created many demands for both general and special needs teachers who have to face the increasing challenges of a diversified population of students with SEN (Agorastou, Kalyva, Kaderoglou and Stefanidis 2009). It is noteworthy that the inclusion movement has received a positive response from typically developing children (Kalyva and Agalotis 2009), their parents (Kalyva, Georgiadi and Tsakiris, 2007; Tafa and Manolitsis 2003) and teachers (Avramidis et al. 2007; Karakoidas and Dimas 1998; Padelidou and Lambropoulou 1997; Zoniou-Sideri and Vlachou 2006).

There is an enormous gap between the role that teachers hold at school and the role that they should be holding in order to meet the real needs (Curtis, Hunley and Grier 2002; Curtis, Walker, Hunley and Baker 1999; Hutton, Dubes and Muir 1992). The only way for teachers to meet these increasing needs is to cooperate with other professionals, such as school psychologists (Sheridan and Gutkin 2000). Actually, it was Benson and Hughes (1985) who argued over twenty years ago that teachers may be a kind of school psychologist who has been overlooked by the educational system.

So, teachers do not fulfil only an educational role; they act also as informers regarding academic or behavioral problems that are exhibited by students. They are often the ones who identify these problems and inform the relevant agencies (Prawat 1992; Westerman 1991). Therefore, it is important that they are knowledgeable about the different types of SEN.

The knowledge that general and special needs teachers have about the different kinds of special needs may differ to a great extent because of the diverse amount of time that they have to spend every day in the presence of students with special educational needs (Hamburger 1993; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe and Ropp 1997). It is likely that special needs teachers feel that they have to be more knowledgeable about students with SEN, because they are in daily contact with their superiors and the reports that they write are taken into consideration by the Local Educational Authority when making a decision about the placement or the individualized education plan for a student with SEN. General teachers, on the other hand, may feel that they do not need to know too much about SEN, since they work primarily with typically developing children (Abel and Burke 1985; Medway 1977; Sheridan et al. 2000). In this context, the aim of the present study is to examine the knowledge that general and special needs teachers have about three major types of SEN, namely learning disabilities, autism, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Method

Participants

The participants of the present study were 229 primary schoolteachers aged between 25 and 59 years old (mean age = 41 years and 8 months) - 95 men (41%) and 134 women (59%). Out of the participants, 66 (29%) were special needs teachers and 163 (71%) were general teachers. Their teaching experience varied from 3-35 years (mean years of teaching experience = 16 years). Just 11% of all the teachers had received some kind of postgraduate teacher training, so this variable was excluded from further analyses.

Measures

The participants provided demographic data and then they were asked to complete a questionnaire that was adapted from that of Shah (2001) and it has been translated and used in another study by Kalyva and Papageorgiou (2004). The questionnaire assesses knowledge about autism on specific sections: diagnostic criteria, causes, symptoms, treatment and outcome prognosis. It has multiple choices and the respondents are asked to identify the correct response among three. Wrong answers received 0 points and correct answers received 1 point – the maximum score was 10. The original form of the questionnaire included more choices, which were removed in order to decrease their degree of difficulty. The questions that were selected for learning disabilities and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder were extracted from DSM-IV (APA 2000). Cronbach α for the questionnaires were .90 for autism, .86 for learning disabilities, and .87 for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Procedure

The teachers completed the anonymous questionnaires at schools where they were approached and after it was explained to them that participation is voluntary and that

they can withdraw at any time without any penalty. Out of the 300 teachers that were approached originally, 229 returned the questionnaires fully completed. The return rate (76%) was satisfactory.

Results

The knowledge that teachers possessed about the three different types of SEN differed significantly ($F_{(2,492)} = 57.46, p = .000$). More specifically, teachers knew more about learning disabilities ($M = 7.48, SD = 1.60$), followed by autism ($M = 6.53, SD = 1.87$) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder ($M = 6.15, SD = 1.81$). Post-hoc analyses with independent-samples t-tests showed that teachers knew statistically more about learning disabilities than about autism ($t(246) = -7.14, p = .000$) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder ($t(246) = 11.37, p = .000$); they also had statistically more advanced knowledge about autism than about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder ($t(246) = 2.85, p = .005$). Moreover, Pearson's analysis revealed that there is statistically significant positive correlation between knowledge about learning disabilities and knowledge about autism ($r = .29, p = .000$); knowledge about learning disabilities and knowledge about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder ($r = .43, p = .000$); and knowledge about autism and knowledge about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder ($r = .37, p = .000$). Finally, Mann-Whitney showed that there are no differences in the knowledge that teachers possess according to whether they are special needs or general teachers and so no further analysis was undertaken.

Discussion

This study showed that teachers know more about learning disabilities, followed by autism and attention-deficit disorder/hyperactivity. It was expected that teachers would know more about learning disabilities, since it is the type of SEN that they encounter more often in their classrooms and in the past decade there has been a lot of public discussion and many seminars about learning disabilities all over the country (Avramidis and Kalyva 2004). Almost every teacher has attended at least one talk or seminar or presentation on this topic. Autism is another topic that has become very popular lately, since there has been an increase in the number of students with high-functioning autism who attend mainstream schools; this change made the disorder more known among teachers who started discussing about possible treatments and educational interventions for this population. The insufficient knowledge that exists about attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is somewhat surprising, given that it coexists often with learning disabilities, and it is not often treated as a separate disorder. This might also explain why children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder are commonly considered to be “naughty”, “spoilt” or “brats” and their behavior is not treated as a disorder. The fact that special needs and general teachers do not differ in the amount of knowledge that they have for each type of SEN could be attributed to the lack of specialized training (Vlachou 2004, 2006).

The correlation that exists between the knowledge about learning disabilities, autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is statistically significant, albeit not so high. The greater correlation that exists between the knowledge about learning disabilities and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder might be accounted for by the fact that these two disorders usually appear together (Kalyva 2005). The weak positive correlations that exist regarding the knowledge about the three types of SEN are indicative of fragmented knowledge and personal choices of the teachers to

receive extra training. This also raises the issue, whether teachers are provided with superficial knowledge and a general approach to the majority of disorders without having the opportunity to study each one more in depth (Stefa 2001).

The present study has certain limitations: a) since the questionnaire had multiple choices it is not possible to exclude that some participants answered correctly out of chance and not because they knew the correct answer (Avramidis and Kalyva 2006); this could have been avoided if the respondents were prompted to write their own answer, but then it would be more time consuming to score them; b) it cannot be assessed how the teachers put into practice the knowledge that they have regarding each type of SEN and whether they use this knowledge to inform their teaching techniques that are largely defined by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Efstathiou 2003); and c) almost one fourth of the teachers who were approached refused to participate in the study because they claimed that they were overworked and disappointed about the lack of support that they receive from the state; however, it could be the case that they felt that they do now know enough and so decided not to complete the questionnaire (Avramidis et al. 2006). If this is true, then the actual knowledge of teachers might be even lesser than portrayed in the present study.

It is evident with the findings of this study that if teachers are to meet the increased demands that are placed on them, then they have to get more specialized training in SEN that will address the actual needs of the students.

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