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PLAY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: GREEK TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

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Abstract:

Inclusive education requires the use of varied strategies and techniques to ensure equal participation of all students in the school society, and to advance their development. Due to its nature and qualities, play activates a child's full dynamics; it forms part of flexible, child-centered and participatory/experiential educational strategies for celebrating diversity in education. Given the latest research findings and the critical significance of teachers for any successful teaching program, this research aims to discuss the attitudes of Greek teachers towards inclusive education, as well as the role and the importance of play for inclusive education. Data was collected via questionnaires with both open-ended and close-ended questions that were distributed to forty-eight participants. Data analysis brought forward three dimensions to the topic in question, namely a) there are practical difficulties that teachers face in their efforts to include everyone due to curriculum inflexibility; strictly structured curricula obstruct inclusion and do not allow for a cooperative culture, b) generally speaking, the terms *inclusive education* and *special education* are used ambiguously in academia and in the literature; furthermore, not distinguishing between the social and the medical aspect of disability appears to make inclusive education more difficult, and to lead teachers to ignore their responsibilities, and c) the teachers' approach to play is superficial.

Keywords: play; inclusive education; inclusion; teachers' attitudes; elementary school

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1. Literature Review

1.1. Inclusion and Inclusive Education

Inclusion is a general approach to action in different societal contexts based on the principles of human equality, social justice (Booth, Ainscow, & Kingston, 2006), fair treatment regardless of one's physical characteristics, personal choices or socio-economic status and can lead to a more democratic society. Education, in particular, is discussed by Preece (2006) as a means to minimizing social inequalities and to promoting conscientiousness and responsibility as a safeguard for democratic values in society. Furthermore, inclusive education adheres to the principle that each student should participate equitably in the school community and should be appreciated for their uniqueness (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008).

Putting the values of inclusive education into action is a matter that has already been discussed by the scientific community. This article acknowledges that there are objections as to whether the values of inclusion can materialize in the school setting (Kauffman, 2002). Inclusion is perceived in various ways, and its meaning is not fully agreed upon since stakeholders understand it differently, depending on their education (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Hollins, 2011; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). According to Stubbs (2008), though, any restrictions or objections about inclusive education can be overcome if the concept is thoroughly analyzed and understood.

According to the South African White Paper (South Africa Department of Education, 2001), and the World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2015), inclusive education can be defined as a dynamic and constantly evolving system based on the inalienable right to education and on the principle that education can be a weapon against social inequality (Preece, 2006). Inclusive education refers to all people, regardless of their physical characteristics (age, gender, complexion, disability), their social/cultural, religious and financial background, and their personal choices (such as gender identity). Physical presence in the classroom does not signify inclusive education. For inclusive education to be effective, teachers should be adequately qualified and able to embrace diversity amongst the students. Teaching strategies should adjust to the needs of the respective students, educators and context, while the environment should be accessible and friendly. What is more, inclusive education advocates collaboration between the schooling system and the communities (Booth, Ainscow, & Kingston, 2006) so as to combat discrimination and accomplish the goal of social justice (Preece, 2006), hence the importance of cooperation among teachers (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Merchant, 2009; Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012).

Inclusive education for students with disabilities has been subject to intense debate for many years (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006; King, 2003; Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). In Greece inclusive education as a term is relatively new, even though the discussion about equal opportunities in education goes back to the 1980s when relevant legislation was passed (Zoniou-Sideri, 2000). Many researchers doubt the effectiveness of full inclusion in general classrooms mainly on

applicability and practicality grounds (Kauffman, 2002). However, research findings demonstrate that inclusive education offers many advantages both for students with disabilities and for their typically developing peers as well as social advantages through combating social ignorance, stereotyping and social discrimination (Preece, 2006).

There are multiple benefits to inclusive education for children in many developmental aspects (Henninger & Gupta, 2014). Evidence shows that inclusion can influence positively children's social and behavioral skills. According to Katz and Mirenda (2002) inclusive education benefits involve pragmatic language development, self-concept building, making friends, and the feeling of happiness itself. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the academic development of students throughout the school year is affected by the competence of their classmates (Mashburn, Justice, Downer, & Pianta, 2009). General classes offer the asset of exposure to positive peer modeling (Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Carter & Kennedy, 2006), which can lead to the promotion of both cognitive and social development for students with disabilities. Peer modeling is essentially based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, according to which learning can be triggered by social interaction through observation, imitation, internalization and modeling of the behaviors of the more adequate peers. In this way, cooperation between typically developing students and students with disabilities can be constructive.

Following a review of 36 studies regarding the cognitive and social accomplishments of mentally retarded students, Freeman and Alkin (2000) reported that academic success and social skills in integrated students were more advanced compared to segregated students. Accordingly, students with disabilities in full-time general classrooms appeared to have more advanced social skills, too. Moreover, their acceptance rate was higher than that of students with disabilities who only spent part of their school day in general schools. Given that social acceptance rates amongst students are usually linked to similarity mainly in social behavior (Freeman & Alkin, 2000), this high acceptance rate probably means that either the students with disabilities develop their social skills to fit in or that the typically developing students realize that their peers with disabilities are not so different, despite their dissimilarities in some respects, and accept them. Whatever the explanation, tolerance towards diversity and inclusion, in general, can be promoted through this kind of acceptance at school.

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the academic development of students throughout the school year is affected by the competence of their classmates (Mashburn, Justice, Downer, & Pianta, 2009). Apparently, it is productive for students to be in a group of relatively highly skilled classmates (Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2003). As a result, academic success can be achieved by students with disabilities as they learn beside their competent peers (Hall, Colins, Benjamin, Nind, & Sheehy, 2004).

Based on the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), the argument is that cooperative learning between a less skilled child and a more skilled peer can assist the former to develop problem-solving strategies and to advance cognitively. On the contrary, students who are already proficient themselves appear to

be unaffected by the lower skills level of their peers with disabilities (Hanushek et al., 2003; Justice, Petscher, Schatschneider, & Mashburn, 2011). This means that interaction opportunities offered by inclusive education are cognitively beneficial for students with disabilities, with no collateral damage for the academic development of their typically developing classmates.

Besides the benefits inclusive education might have for students, it also contributes to the greater goal of an inclusive society. By including all students in a general curriculum and in all school activities, this atmosphere of equity in the school microsystem can then be brought by students into the community. As inclusive education is founded on the principles of equality (UNESCO, 2015), it challenges practices allowing for exclusion and marginalization, and can be considered as a persuasive resource in the battle against ignorance, indifference and social irresponsibility (Preece, 2006). What is more, the fact that education is an equally fundamental right for everyone cannot be overlooked, which means that inclusiveness in education is not a matter of choice but, rather, an expression of one's commitment to human rights.

Finally, educational inclusiveness can support social justice by breaking the cycle of disability and poverty. Save The Children believes that disability and poverty are interrelated (Save the Children, 2002) because impoverished families are not, usually, in a position to offer the appropriate kind of education to their children with disabilities. Similarly, families struggling with disability are more likely to exhaust their financial resources in the effort to help their disabled member. Education can offer the skills and knowledge to break this cycle. Furthermore, inclusive education can enable people with disabilities to fight against prejudice, to make their voice heard in the community, and to gain the practical skills and confidence required for them to take their rightful place in society.

1.2 Strategies for Inclusive Education

Increasing demand for inclusive practices in general, education settings can be considered to highlight the general teachers' responsibilities as to the individual learning needs of all students. According to Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy, and Weathermouth (2009), educator efficacy in inclusive settings is usually closely related to their understanding of these responsibilities and their ability to plan and act so that all students are encouraged and empowered to become involved in the learning-teaching processes.

Research has shown that both students with disabilities and typically developing students are capable of realizing that they learn differently from each other (Klinger & Vaughn, 1999). Moreover, they value teachers who are willing to use different techniques and several teaching styles in order to meet the needs of each and every individual learner. The idea that not all students learn in the same way because not all people are alike leads to the concept of differentiated instruction (Obiakor et al., 2012).

Differentiated instruction acknowledges the differences of cognitive and linguistic background among students as well as their readiness and interests so that

the educator can plan their lesson accordingly (Hall, 2002). Furthermore, teaching, goals and assessment must be adjusted by the teacher so as to accommodate the needs of all students in an inclusive classroom (King, 2003). Apparently, active planning and flexibility of approach are of great importance for an inclusive lesson, and teachers should be prepared to adapt in order to be able to offer quality education to all learners (Berry, 2006). Subsequently, for inclusive education to be achieved it is vital that the curriculum and the educational system in general adjust to the needs of the students, and not vice versa (UNESCO, 2015).

Besides differentiated instruction, educators can use many more strategies to achieve inclusive education. Katz and Mirenda (2002) suggest flexible grouping, co-operative learning and peer tutoring, choice-making opportunities, multimodality instruction and flexible response activities, curriculum- or performance-based assessment and collaborative teaching. Other well-known inclusive strategies are embedded learning opportunities (Horn & Banerjee, 2009), activity-based interventions (Ozen & Ergenekon, 2011) and peer-mediated intervention (Robertson, Green, Alper, Schloss, & Kohler, 2003).

What all of the above strategies have in common is flexibility and autonomy in learning. Students are free to collaborate in order to make decisions and to come up with the answers they look for without being stressed about giving the wrong answer. They informally teach each other and learn from each other. At the same time, the information might be given in different formats, i.e. visual, aural or kinesthetic so as to reach out to all learners. The aim is for learning to take place in the safest and least restrictive environment possible.

1.3. Play as a Strategy for Inclusive Education

Qualities such as free choice, flexibility, autonomy, freedom seem to characterize children's play as well; play practice has been found to offer a successful strategy for the promotion of inclusion in educational settings (Papacek, Chai, & Green, 2015). In spite of how difficult it is to define play (McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011), its value is progressively being recognized as an important means of learning and well-being (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Efforts are, therefore, being made to better understand it and utilize it in the school setting. Furthermore, play appears to be children's first choice in order to interact and they are motivated and enthusiastic about it (King, 1979; Landreth 2002), which means that play is an important means for enhancing inclusive education.

Although a comprehensive definition of play has not been agreed upon yet, it cannot be denied that some commonalities and certain patterns can be found among the existing definitions (Papacek et al., 2015). Play can be described as a voluntary state of acting which involves the player focusing their energy on an activity that is infused with cheerfulness and joy (Children's Play Information Service, 2002). Play is also considered to be freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and spontaneous (Garvey, 1990), and does not have any external goals or rewards (Parten, 1933).

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that play is beneficial to many aspects of children's development[ii]. Physical development can be promoted by the manipulation of objects and by moving within a given area, cognitive development and concentration skills are encouraged by curiosity in play, while symbolic play supports language development and communication. Children's Play Intervention Service (2002) confirms those benefits and adds that, when a child masters such physical and communication skills, play-based activities as well as social competencies are seen to develop.

According to Piaget (1962), play is vital for a child's early identity. Through play children learn about social rules and relationship models which help them construct a concept of themselves and of others, and to develop certain social skills. Play behaviors are central to promoting social and communication skills (Lee, Odom, & Loftin, 2007), and the more children get to understand the rules, limitations and joy of social play, the more their approach to social situations and decision-making can evolve (Papaceket al., 2015). Subsequently, a child's further social behavior will be influenced by the identity shaped through their playful interactions (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

Moreover, play is paramount for developing self-regulation, which helps children learn to control their emotions and actions (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006), communicate feelings and develop coping mechanisms in view of affective and intellectual challenges (Fearn & Howard, 2012). Panksepp (2007) indicates that certain types of play promote the socialization of the brain, thus furthering the development of emotional intelligence and Theory of Mind. Apparently, emotional arousal, fun and enjoyment that are linked to ludic action are of a genetic origin and promote the social brain (Panskepp, 2007) which is responsible for the acquisition of a set of mental abilities allowing one to detect and understand the emotional state of others. This set of abilities is defined by Hetu, Taschereau-Dumouchel, and Jackson (2012) as empathy, and its role is considered to be crucial for human socialization and, thus, inclusion.

Pretend play, for example, is considered to assist in social development, since it takes place in a social context and it requires communication between the players (Bergen, 2002). Jennings (2002) also argues that pretense during pretend or dramatic play is likely to generate the real feeling, which may assist in the development of a child's emotional intelligence, empathy and Theory of Mind. What is more, according to Gainsley (2011) sensory play in groups also promotes social development, since children have to play in a limited space and to work on their co-operation, sharing and conflict resolution skills.

[ii] Nevertheless, focusing on how play assists physical, cognitive or language development in children with disabilities would approximate more to therapeutic play or occupational therapy, rather than to the ideology of inclusion. Trying to promote such developmental aspects in children with disabilities would constitute a legitimate effort to improve their quality of life; however, this could also be considered as an effort to assimilate them to their typically developing peers. Given the fact that acceptance rates amongst children are highly influenced by similarity (Freeman & Alkin, 2000), having a child with disabilities assimilate to their peers might seem as the easiest way to involve them in the group. However, inclusion is not about creating homogeneity by bringing everyone to the same level; it is about accepting and embracing diversity. For this reason, the impact of play on social and emotional development will be our main focus of attention.

There are certain factors in play that are linked to the quality and frequency of children's social interactions that will, eventually, determine the efficacy of play as a strategy for inclusion (Chandler, Fowler, & Lubeck, 1992; Mason, Kamps, Turcotte, Cox, Feldmiller, & Miller, 2014; Papacek et al., 2015; Wong & Kasari, 2012). Such factors include play environment arrangements, the availability of toys/activities, (Wong, 2013), peer grouping (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001; Hobson, Hobson, Malik, Bargiota, & Calo, 2013; Petursdottir, McComas, McMaster, & Horner, 2007; Wong, 2013), the adults' role (Howard & McInnes, 2010) and freedom of choice (Kapasi & Gleave, 2009; King, 1979; King & Howard, 2014).

Nevertheless, Howard, Bellin, and Rees (2003) suggest that, especially in a school setting, it is not play itself but, rather, the internal state of playfulness that benefits children's development. In contrast to play, which can be usually described by a series of observable characteristics, playfulness is an amalgamation of internal qualities depending mainly on the player (Howard et al., 2003). Furthermore, even if some activities look like play from a teacher's perspective, and specific outcomes are anticipated, one can never be sure about how the activity is going to be perceived by students themselves, and whether they will feel playful enough to benefit from it. Teacher role and student control and choice over the activity are important, among other factors, to ensure the effectiveness of play as a means for inclusion. Adult agendas at school might, naturally, restrict student freedom of choice in play, in order to achieve the goal of inclusion. In this context, play is organized by the teacher so as to make sure that it is appropriate for everyone, since some children's free choice of play could be excluding children with specific disabilities. A certain range of options is still given to children, though, so that an illusion of freedom of choice is created to secure the beneficial effects of playfulness.

In her research on childhood and play, Makrynioti (2000, 2014) explains how this illusion is abused and emphasizes the significance of viewing children not as the object but as the subject of the scientific and pedagogical standpoint: "*This supposedly liberating dimension of play and the element of spontaneous engagement lead to activities organized so as to look like play; in fact, however, such activities entail atypical normalcy criteria and mechanisms aimed to supervise and regulate children's personality*" (Makrynioti, 2000, p. 116).

Teachers play a crucial role regarding the effective use of play, which is mainly a function of their personal/experiential understanding of it. Even when they are theoretically cognizant of the nature and importance of play, they cannot use it in their classroom unless they become directly involved in the play process. Experiential understanding of play by teachers has not been discussed enough in the literature. As a result, players lose their connection to play itself in the context of strictly structured and organized activities.

Our research[iii] work has always highlighted the importance of offering teachers an active and experiential education on play, theatre and the arts. Play, theater, and arts education will enable teachers to practically comprehend the methodology which is

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[iii] See e.g. Lenakakis 2004 and Λενακάκης 2008, 2013, 2014.

based on flexible thinking and acting, creativity, sensitivity, self-knowledge and discipline. During the play experience, there is a time and place for ideas to develop and to be tested in a safe setting, and for new ways of expression and of action to take shape. Teachers participating in the play experience have the opportunity to realize that, possibly, their understanding of objective reality is unilateral, so that they can proceed to redefine it. At the same time, this broadens their conceptual horizons, enriches their means of expression, makes communication more attractive, and, finally, empowers their personal and teaching repertoire. Such updates, alternations, modifications and transformations of personal teaching repertoires can bring teachers closer to the nature of play, make standardized teaching improvisational, motivate and incentivize participants as well as utilize their pool of aesthetic-teaching-learning experiences[iv]. At the end of the day, it is important for teachers to be skillful, inspired and sensitive, to be playful and able to use their curriculum critically, depending on the needs of each separate and diverse group of students.

1.4 Challenges and Limitations

An inclusive school system is not easy to implement; it depends on many factors that may or may not guarantee its success. Such factors include teacher education and attitudes toward inclusion at school, the nature of the school system and curricula, the provision of support and the quality of relationships among stakeholders. Utilizing play as a tool for inclusive education, in particular, can be even harder, due to lack of information on the significance and value of play, teacher avoidance of the play experience and obstacles due to the nature of the curriculum. These factors will be discussed below, both generally and in the context of Greek school reality.

To begin with, the success of an inclusive school system revolves around the attitudes of those who are most closely involved with the students, i.e. teachers (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Apparently, the extent to which teachers accept and are satisfied with the inclusive and educational policy has a significant impact on how committed they are to serve it (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). When teachers understand and agree with the guidelines they have been given, it is more likely that they will persevere in their efforts to attain the goals of inclusive education, hence the importance of educator attitudes to inclusion.

Burke and Sutherland (2004) suggest that there is no congruence of attitude among in-service teachers, pre-service teachers and principals. The more experienced and educated teachers are about inclusion, the more positive their feelings about it will be, as shown by Greek research work, too. Athanasakis (2010) demonstrates how teachers' feelings about having students with learning difficulties range from stress and insecurity to love and acceptance, with the negative feelings being the most prevalent. Moreover, such attitudes appear to be strongly related to the number of years of experience and to academic achievement. Younger teachers and teachers with no further training in special education or inclusion were more likely to say they felt

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[iv] See also Rogers, 1999, Mezirow et al., 2006 and Illeris, 2009.

inadequate, while teachers with Masters degrees expressed more positive feelings such as respect, interest and challenge.

For Georgoulia (2014), even though Greek teachers with PhDs and Masters have positive feelings and recognize the importance of inclusion in general, they are still unable to tell the difference between integration and inclusive education. That might reveal a shallow understanding by the Greek teacher community of the inclusive mechanisms due to terminology issues. Furthermore, Greek teachers appear to have difficulties in differentiating their teaching according to the needs of their students; the vast majority does not have the skills to plan separately for each student (Christakis, 2014). Thus, according to Zoniou-Sideri and Vlachou (2006) only 40% of Greek teachers are willing to change their teaching principles, and 95% are reluctant to innovate in order to meet the needs of inclusive education. Consequently, the successful implementation of inclusive education will be determined by the readiness of teachers to take responsibility for the education of all students (Lachana & Efstathiou, 2015).

Having said that, stakeholder cooperation is necessary, i.e. cooperation among parents, teachers, administrators and academia (Soodak et al., 2002). Obiakor and colleagues (2012) agree that inclusion is most successful when practitioners and service providers cooperate and consult in order to empower the students, while Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2008) underline school leader responsibility to work together with teachers towards the common goal of inclusion.

It is not clear whether a successful collaboration between teachers and service providers exists in Greece, mainly due to lack of assessment of the school system and its practitioners. However, Christakis (2014) mentions that the relationship between Greek teachers and parents of disabled students is tense. Parents are often not adequately informed regarding the disability of their child, they cannot handle it and tend to blame the teachers; teachers, on the other hand, lack education about special or inclusive education, and none of the two sides wants to take responsibility and help the child.

Regardless of teacher attitudes and knowledge, school system and curricula structure are just as important. Action should be taken to reinforce the school system, so that it can adequately support the needs of all students, and prevent school failure, categorization and stigmatization (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013). What is more, according to Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), curricula should be flexible and adjustable to achieve inclusion.

However, in the Greek school system the focus is more on theoretical knowledge and academic performance rather than on personality development or moral values (Georgoulia, 2014). The Greek curriculum is considered to be an absolute and strict one, abounding in detail as to how each and every lesson should be without taking into account student diversity in nature, talent and needs (Bagakis, 2004). Such curriculum precision and its concomitant lack of freedom is seen as an effort to control education in a bureaucratic way (Mavrogiorgos, 1992).

However, it would make a big difference should there be support for families and practitioners. Christakis (2014) argues that, in Greece, there is not enough support to train parents and teachers or to assist them. Furthermore, people with disabilities

have to deal with separate education, diagnosis, health and welfare services (Lachana & Efstathiou, 2015), which leads to piecemeal solutions that do not enhance inclusion.

In contrast to this model, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2013) suggests that, in order for inclusive education to be implemented, schools should integrate the external agencies and be able to offer services other than education. If the school is able to offer that support, the needs of students with disabilities will be met in a more global and direct way, and practitioner cooperation through constructive dialogue will help overcome the obstacles to inclusion.

Greek school practice is not favorable to play. Play research and literature are rather poor, and school play focuses mainly on cognitive results. Furthermore, the use of play in education divides teachers and upsets parents. Avgitidou (2001) argues that this is because of a difference in viewpoint among teachers, parents and policy makers. Teachers are not familiar with play nor accustomed to letting children have the initiative. Skoumpourdi (2015) clarifies that, theoretically, teachers appreciate the educational value of play but only use it to create a controlled and focused educational experience. Parents, too, recognize the benefits of play, but they feel that their children might as well play at home, and that the school is there to provide formal learning. To them, therefore, playing in class equals an indifferent teacher (Avgitidou, 2001).

Reviving play can also be challenging for teachers. The fact that play is recognized as a children's need and right drives adults away from playful activities, thus contributing to preserving and maximizing the social boundaries between adults and children (Makrynioti, 2000).

Finally, there is no official play policy nor any state or official publication supporting play as such, let alone supporting it as an educational tool or as a means for inclusive education.

2. Research Design

2.1. Aim
This research aims to discover teacher perceptions of inclusive education and play, and to determine the value and the role of inclusive education according to Greek teachers. Furthermore, the views teachers have about play are explored alongside their understanding of its benefits, role and functionality for inclusive purposes.

2.2. Methodology
Data was collected via semi-structured questionnaires, which contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questionnaire consisted of three question categories: introductory questions (A), which were used to gain information of demographic interest such as gender, age and years of experience, questions regarding the terminology, the value and the role of inclusive education and play as a strategy for inclusive education (B), and questions regarding the challenges teachers face as well as the methods they use in order to include everyone in their classes (C).

Collected data is both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data was analyzed as per the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each category of questions was examined separately to identify common themes and patterns in the answers given. Five thematic maps were drawn; two for question category (B), and three for question category (C). Data from category (A) were purely demographic (Table 1).

Quantitative data resulted from Likert scales in the form of continuous calibrated lines (Allen & Eaman, 2007) and from a multiple-choice question, and was analyzed descriptively. Regarding the Likert scales, every calibrated line was divided in four equal parts, which were labeled from left to right and from least to most important (e.g. unimportant, rather unimportant, rather important, very important) for answer grouping and efficient analysis purposes. Answers falling within the range of each part of the line were then tallied. The four parts of the line were not visible to the participants, so that their answers would not be driven by the name of the part.

The multiple-choice question offered four options out of which participants could only choose one, and these answers were also tallied and analyzed descriptively.

2.3. Participants

The sample consisted of 48 in-service general education teachers, who work in both urban and rural primary schools in the prefecture of Pieria, Northern Greece. 21 of the participants were male and 27 were female. The majority (n=19) were between the ages of 41-50, seventeen participants were older than 50 years, seven participants were between 13 and 30 years of age, and five from 31 to 40 years old. Half of the participants (n=24) had 16-30 years of experience in teaching at school, nine had 6-15 years of experience, five had 1-5 years, and the rest (n=5) had been teaching for more than 30 years.

Table 1: The Participants

Number of Participants: 48

Sex	Men		Women	
	21		27	
Age	23-30	31-40	41-50	>50
	7	5	19	17
Work Experience	1-5	6-15	16-30	>30
	5	9	24	5

2.4. Collection of Data

The research was carried out according to the Code of Human Research Ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2010), with absolute respect for the moral rights, the autonomy, the dignity, the privacy and the self-determination of participants. Participants were contacted through their principals. An information sheet was sent by e-mail to the schools with basic information about the research, its aims and methods. The information sheet stated clearly that participation was voluntary, and that participants could opt out any time before the publication of research results.

Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires, the teachers had one week to decide whether they would like to participate. Participants remained anonymous and the questions were carefully phrased, so that anyone who had difficulty responding would not feel embarrassed. Respondents were given the opportunity to talk about their difficulties with inclusive education, and to justify their approach. Finally, they were asked to make suggestions, so that they would know that their opinions mattered. They had one week to fill in the questionnaire whenever they felt like it, so that their answers would be complete and reflective.

3. Results

Forty-eight general education teachers filled in the questionnaires; more than half were women over the age of forty who had been in service for more than sixteen years. The participants' age and prior experience covered a broad scope. Ten participants did not answer to category two questions on inclusive education and play about the methods they used to make their classes more inclusive. Unanswered category three questions about teacher challenges and suggestions were more numerous. Unanswered questions only included qualitative open-ended ones.
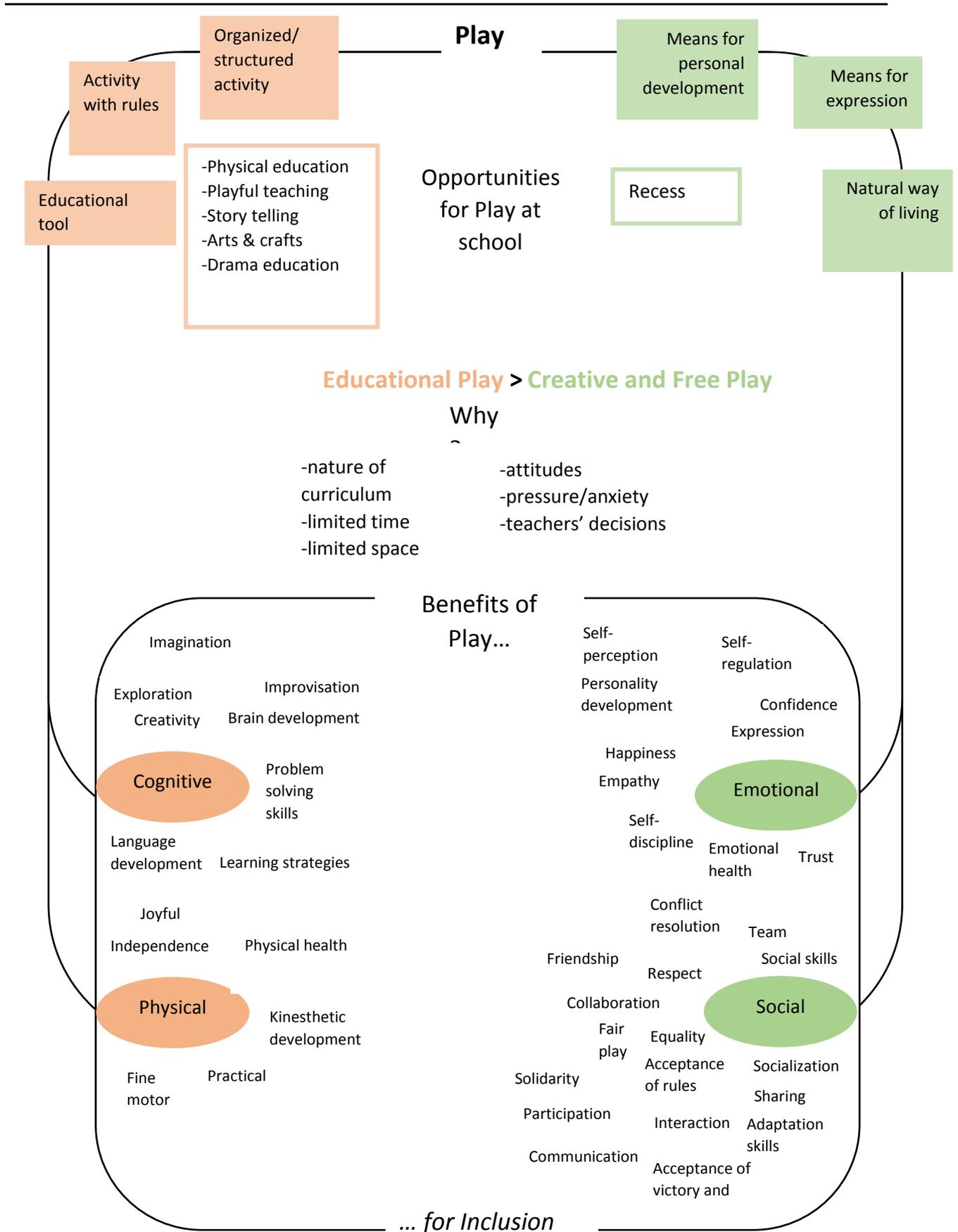
3.1 Play in Education
The answers about the role of play in inclusive education fell within thematic categories on the nature of play, its benefits, the opportunities for play at school and the reasons why play is rare at school.

As far as the nature of play is concerned, some teachers consider it an educational tool; others think of it as a spontaneous and free activity. The first group describe it as an organized, structured activity based on rules; the second group as a means for personal development and expression, and as a natural way of living. The first group cited physical education classes, theatre classes, arts classes, story-telling and playful teaching as opportunities for play at school. On the contrary, free play supporters only saw recess time as an opportunity for play. The reasons given for little play time at school were curriculum pressure, lack of time and space, teacher stress, as well as teacher attitudes and decisions.
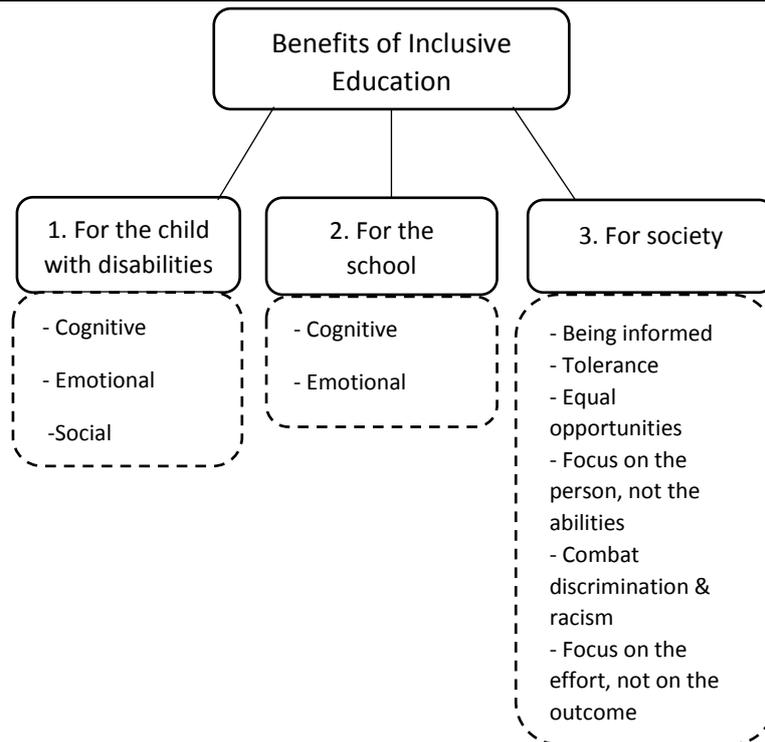
The benefits of play mentioned were cognitive, physical, emotional and social. Cognitive benefits included brain development, enhanced creativity and imagination, problem-solving competences, language and improvisation skills, and improved learning skills through experiential and enjoyable activities. Physical benefits included healthy living, kinesthetic development, advancement of fine motor and practical skills, and the promotion of independence. Emotional benefits included emotional expression, better psychological health, empathy, self-discipline, trust, emotional intelligence, self-concept promotion, confidence, enjoyment and fun. Finally, social benefits included making friends, communication, team spirit, solidarity, healthy competition, acceptance of rules, victory and defeat.

It is crucial to mention that play as an educational tool seemed to be mostly linked to cognitive and physical benefits. On the contrary, play as free expression was linked to emotional and social benefits.

All that data is schematically included in the thematic map below. The two different ways of perceiving play are on top, play as an organized educational activity together with play opportunities at school are on the left-hand side, play as a means of expression together with free play opportunities at school are on the right-hand side, the reasons why children have more chances to engage in organized and structured activities rather than in free play are within brackets, and the benefits of play for inclusive education come at the bottom of the map. Benefits are sorted by type as cognitive, physical, emotional and social.

Play

Activity with rules

Organized/ structured activity

Means for personal development

Means for expression

Educational tool

-Physical education
-Playful teaching
-Story telling
-Arts & crafts
-Drama education

Opportunities for Play at school

Recess

Natural way of living

Educational Play > **Creative and Free Play**

Why?

-nature of curriculum
-limited time
-limited space

-attitudes
-pressure/anxiety
-teachers' decisions

Benefits of Play...

Imagination

Exploration

Improvisation

Creativity

Brain development

Cognitive

Problem solving skills

Language development

Learning strategies

Joyful

Independence

Physical health

Physical

Kinesthetic development

Fine motor

Practical

Self-perception

Self-regulation

Personality development

Confidence

Expression

Happiness

Empathy

Emotional

Self-discipline

Emotional health

Trust

Conflict resolution

Team

Friendship

Respect

Social skills

Collaboration

Social

Fair play

Equality

Socialization

Acceptance of rules

Sharing

Solidarity

Participation

Interaction

Adaptation skills

Communication

Acceptance of victory and

... for Inclusion

Thematic Map 1: Play in Inclusive Education

Thematic Map 2: Benefits of Inclusive Education

Teacher's Role
in Inclusive Education
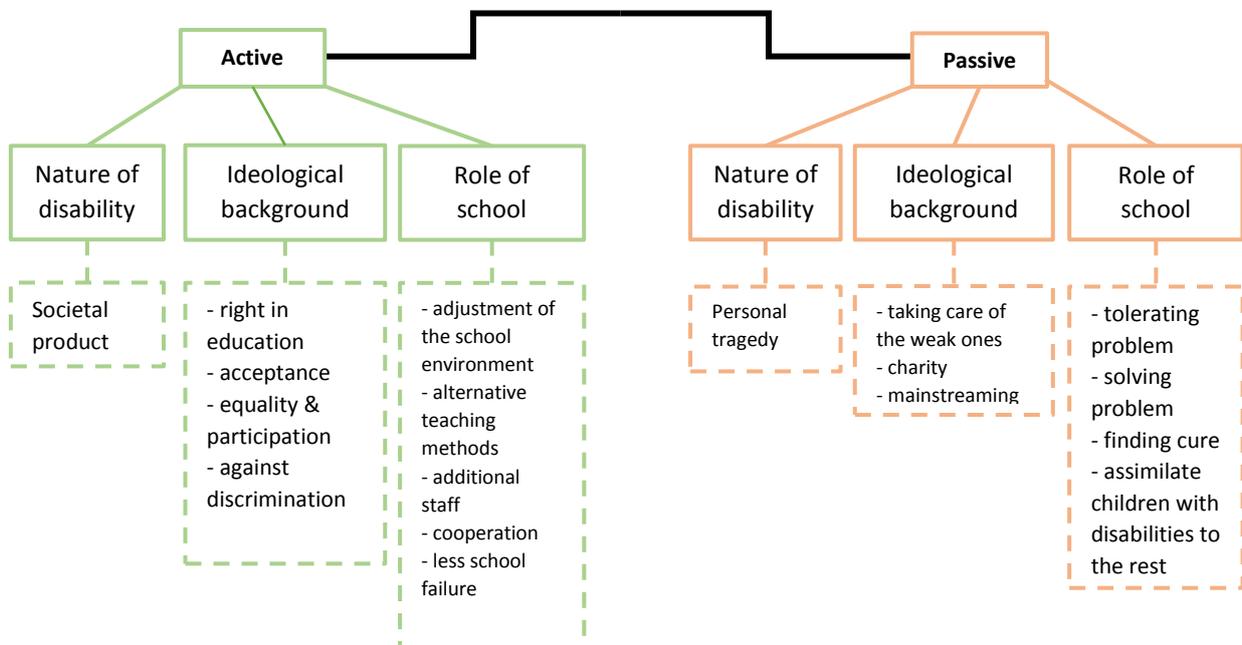
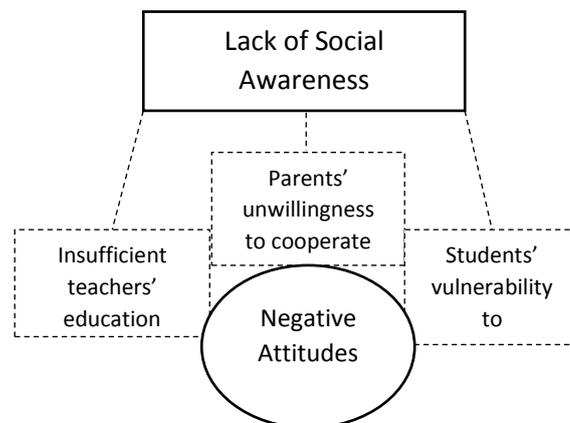**Thematic Map 3:** Teacher's Role in Inclusive Education

3.2. Inclusive Education

Regarding inclusive education, the topics that came up reveal that participants understand that inclusion is an important matter not only at school but in society, too. Additionally, there is the opinion that inclusive education does not only have to do with students with disabilities but, also, with the bilingual ones, and those coming from different religious/social/ethnic backgrounds.

Based on their attitude towards inclusive education, participants fall in two categories: those who see inclusive education as a process in which they themselves have an active role, and those with a passive role in inclusive education. Category one participants understand that disability is a societal product, not a personal deficiency. They take responsibility for creating equal opportunities, and they recognize the responsibility of the family and of the children themselves. They think that cooperation between teachers, children and families is very important for building inclusive education, and for reforming and adapting the school setting. Their concept of inclusive education is ideologically based on the values of equality and participation, acceptance of diversity and education as an inalienable human right.

On the other hand, category two teachers perceive disability as a personal tragedy involving only the person with the disability and their family. Furthermore, it seems that special education teachers are expected to «fix the problem», to «cure» the disability, to somehow bring the child with disabilities to the same developmental stage with their peers so that they become equal. At the same time, everybody else should either pity the child or take care of it and show tolerance.

The benefits of inclusive education fall in three categories, depending on their recipient. For children with disabilities, the benefits mentioned are cognitive, emotional and social. For their typically developed peers the benefits mentioned are cognitive and emotional, while for society there is the benefit of promoting tolerance towards diversity and highlighting the value of equality.


Thematic Map 4: Lack of social awareness: obstacle to inclusive education

Category three questions brought forward the topic of the difficulties teachers face in their effort to promote inclusive education, together with suggestions as to how such obstacles can be overcome. Difficulties come in three groups. Number one, i.e. lack of

public awareness of disability and play, including lack of teacher training, parents who are reluctant to cooperate and children's vulnerability to stereotypes.

Number two, i.e. difficulties due to curriculum structure, include lack of time, too many teaching goals, focus on theory, inflexible approach and long lessons that are tiring for children.

Finally, number three, i.e. difficulties due to the shape the Greek economy is in, include lack of teaching personnel and a high number of students in the classroom.
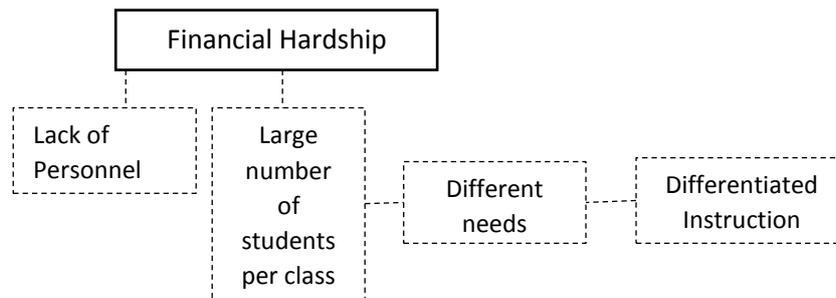
Thematic Map 1: Financial hardship: obstacle to inclusive education

Participants had suggestions to make for improved professional efficiency and better schools in Greece. Such suggestions included more teacher training, support from diagnosis and special education experts, change of textbooks, and more of free curriculum time so that they can organize their lessons more playfully. Additionally, participants asked for more teaching tools and material and better state fund management for the education sector.

4. Discussion
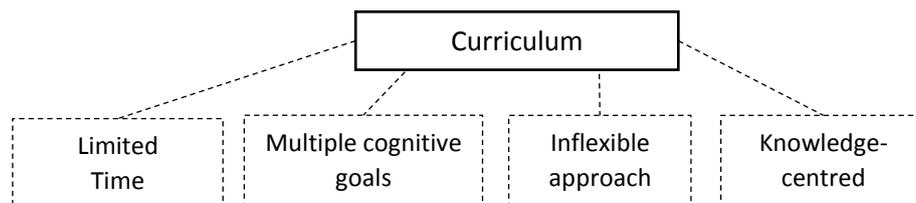
Thematic Map 5: Nature of the curriculum: obstacle to inclusive education

Research findings strongly suggest that Greek teachers disagree about inclusive education, which is not surprising given prior research findings showing that teacher attitudes on inclusion depend on many factors. In the case of inclusive education, such factors include severity and type of student disability (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Forlin & Chambers, 2011), teacher education (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Hollins, 2011; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008), even teacher experience, age and gender

(Athanasakis, 2010; Avramidis et al., 2000; Ellins & Porter, 2005; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001; Vaz, Wilson, Falkmer, Sim, Scott, Cordier, & Falkmer, 2015).[v]

Despite the fact that the type and severity of student disability is considered to be a prediction factor for teacher attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Forlin & Chambers, 2011), participants of the present research did not distinguish between students with different disabilities. Furthermore, it seemed as though the severity of the disability was not considered to be a challenge. This runs contrary to study findings (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin & Chambers, 2011) demonstrating a correlation between the disability type and severity, and teacher attitudes, such that the more severe the disability of the student, the less likely it was for the teacher to be positive about accommodating them, and that students with emotional and behavioral difficulties can cause more stress to their teachers that students with other types of disabilities.

However, this superficial tolerance on the part of Greek teachers for any disability type or severity may boil down to their conviction that they are not really responsible for educating students with disabilities, and that this is the job of special education teachers. When asked for suggestions on how to improve inclusive education some participants said that *"it is important that special classes function without interference in general schools"*, *"more special education teachers must be hired"*, and *"special education material should be developed for students with disabilities, and it should be taught by specially trained teachers"*. It is obvious from such answers that the majority of participants considered the advancement of inclusive education to be out of their hands because it is up to government policies and special education teachers to take this responsibility.

Christakis (2014) underlines the extent to which Greek teachers find it difficult to take responsibility for the education of students with disabilities, and attributes this difficulty to the lack of collaboration between teachers and parents or other specialists. According to Christakis, families tend to send their children with disabilities to school believing that teachers can "cure" them, and that this is where their parental role ends. Respectively, teachers complain that they are not specially trained to accommodate students with disabilities and that they cannot achieve much with students who have been diagnosed late and whose parents are not willing to seek additional help from

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[v] It would not be safe to draw research conclusions here about whether teacher age, experience or gender is correlated with their attitudes, because such demographic data was not analyzed to that effect. However, prior research (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Vaz et al., 2011) has shown that older teachers usually have more negative attitudes towards inclusive education. Vaz and colleagues (2011) explain the correlation between age and attitude based on the different education older teachers have had and the major changes that they are forced to make in their strategies and ideology. Nevertheless, Van Reusen et al. (2001) argue that it is experience with inclusive education, rather than the actual age that influences teachers' attitudes.

Furthermore, gender seems to be a predictor for teacher attitudes towards inclusive education. Athanasakis (2010) found that male educators are more likely to be negative towards inclusive education. This notion is supported by Vaz et al. (2011) as well, who suggest that the reason for such a correlation is not yet known, and that the difference between male and female teachers seems to be one of theoretical perception instead of practical action.

other experts. Responsibility is thus tossed from one party to the other but, in the end, no one is actually there to act for the disabled student's benefit.

Moreover, Ghanizadeh, Bahredar, and Moeini (2005) have found that many teachers see certain aspects of disability as a result of parental spoiling. Regarding disabilities affecting social skills in particular, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, it might seem difficult for a teacher to distinguish between the behavior that is caused by the disability and the behavior caused by the family culture. Generally speaking, it is natural that parental grief (Kearney & Griffin, 2001) for the disability of their child together with the medical model towards disability that prevails in Greece and the lack of parental awareness and skills about how to approach their disabled child causes parents to make mistakes in the upbringing of their children. Such mistakes can easily spoil a child with disability- just as they would do to a typically developing child- and, even though there is no research backing it, such spoiling might enhance a teacher's negative attitude to inclusion and to working together with the parents.

Indeed, participants in the present study confirm that they have difficulty cooperating with student families and with their colleagues. Cooperation in the school community is crucial for inclusive education. For Obiakor et al. (2011) inclusive education is most successfully implemented when teachers cooperate and consult with each other as per the same guidelines applying to external diagnosis service providers. The role of school leaders is significant, too. Carter, Prater, Jackson, and Merchant (2009) emphasize the significance of cooperation stating that, for their cooperation to work, teachers should share the same philosophy regarding the education of students with disabilities. Given the above, the difficulty Greek teachers have in working with each other may be due to their different ideologies and education.

Additionally, teacher attitudes seem to be related to their education (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Burke & Sutherland, 2004; Hollins, 2011; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). Apparently, the more educated teachers are regarding special or inclusive education or the more accustomed they are to it, the more positive their attitudes are towards including students with disabilities in the general classroom. Sharma et al. (2008) research about pre-service teacher attitudes to inclusive education concludes that the quality of university syllabi for teachers is extremely important for generating positive sentiment and ideology towards inclusive education. Sharma et al. go on to say that direct and systematic contact with people with disabilities assists in understanding disability and raises teacher awareness of inclusive policies and relevant legislation.

Positive attitudes by academically equipped teachers could relate to them feeling proficient in accommodating students with different needs. Athanasakis (2010) explains that the higher the Greek teachers' academic level is, and the more experienced they are, the less likely it is for them to have negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. However, Hemmings and Woodcock (2011) stress that increased awareness can also have the opposite result by generating negative feelings about inclusion in teachers. In that sense, teachers who already know that they will have to face specific

challenges to make inclusive education work for students with disabilities are discouraged and do not even want to try.

This apparent confusion between the medical and the social concept of disability (Oliver, 1996) leads to the conclusion that not all teachers understand the social nature of disability and their role in inclusive education. Additionally, when participants were asked whether they had further training in inclusive education, only a minority answered positively explaining that they had been trained in special education. Such answers are probably indicative of a misunderstanding as to the terms *special education* and *inclusive education*, as well as of a certain difficulty amongst teachers to comprehend that not all special education models abide by the values and principles of inclusive education.

Special education focuses on the medical concept of disability and on what students cannot do because of their physical or mental disadvantages. On the contrary, inclusive education respects everyone's right to equal education and suggests ways to involve everybody, celebrating diversity and using it as a resource (UNESCO, 2015). Baglieri and Knopf (2004) argue that, in a genuinely inclusive class, the educator normalizes any difference between the students by differentiating their instruction within a school culture which reflects democratic ideology, principles and values. Having special education knowledge does entail awareness of the different types of disabilities, their symptoms, their causes or comorbidities but does not guarantee that such knowledge will be used for inclusive purposes.

Mistaking special education for inclusive education may be partially explained by the fact that general education and special education come under separate university departments and syllabi. According to UNESCO (2008), such separation enhances discrimination between these two types of education and does not support inclusive education. Besides, special education syllabi should not be seen as irrelevant to those of general education; on the contrary, both should be part of the greater framework of inclusive education. Moreover, additional training is always necessary for general and special education teachers alike in order for them to make this transition from a discriminatory to an inclusive teaching practice (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013).

Despite the obvious confusion about terminology and inclusive ideology, participants seemed to realize that inclusive education is relevant not only to students with disabilities but to any student who might be different in some way (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008). Other groups of students, such as bilingual students, and students from religious or ethnic minorities were mentioned in the answers as being worthy of equal attention in their class. However, neither students from the lower financial and social strata (Preece, 2006) nor students with differentiated sexual identities were mentioned.

Greek teachers also seemed to understand that inclusive education for each and everybody at school is inextricably linked to involving all humans in society in general; inclusive education was said to affect school life during lessons, field trips, recess play

and in physical education classes. Additionally, student inclusion in society later on was mentioned as a long-term goal.

Participants identified many inclusive education benefits, which were subsequently sorted per recipient. Students with disabilities were considered to benefit cognitively, emotionally and socially. Participants considered that inclusive education enabled students with disabilities to access higher standards of education, to become more motivated, and to improve their practical skills. Such benefits have already been documented in the literature (Hall et al., 2004; Hanushek et al., 2003; Mashburn et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

Furthermore, participants thought that, through inclusive education, students with disabilities could advance socially and emotionally (Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Henninger & Gupta 2014; Katz & Mirenda, 2002). They mentioned learning to cooperate, to communicate and to interact appropriately, making friends, becoming motivated to participate more and becoming as independent from one's carer as possible. Emotionally, those students were expected to be more balanced in a general classroom by shaping their identity, by feeling empowered, and by developing feelings of belonging and self-respect.

For typically developing students, inclusive education advantages were said to be emotional and cognitive. Cognitive benefits included using alternative teaching methods, understanding diversity in general and accepting "the looks" of disability. Emotional ones included respect, empathy and solidarity. Societal benefits cited were awareness of disability, tolerance, equal opportunities, eradicating discrimination, and focusing on the person and not on their skills, which is also mentioned by the World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2015).

Teacher attitudes towards inclusive education were looked into prior to examining their attitudes towards play as a means to inclusive education. Given the variety of strategies and methods enhancing children's social and emotional development in inclusive education, play does relate to such strategies due to its nature and benefits.

Participants were not unanimous in their definition of play; some described it as a structured activity subject to rules or as an educational tool with expected learning outcomes. For others it was a natural way of living, and a means for personal expression and development.

Those having described play as a tool with specific outcomes did not specify whether inclusion was one of them; the teacher's apparent role during this kind of play is to provide organization and guidance. Such attitudes towards play agree with Hyvonen's (2011) findings that teachers usually understand play as a useful activity with specific external goals, and their role is that of "supporter" or "leader".

Howard (2010) also concurs that teachers mostly choose to monitor and guide children's play instead of supporting it or engaging in it. Participant views of play opportunities at school corroborate this finding; "physical education", "theatre education", "art class", "playful teaching" and "story telling" are typical examples of contained, rather strictly structured play with formal rules which are critical for the

successful conclusion of the activity; the objectives are clear-cut and the teacher's leading role is crucial for attaining them.

A smaller part of the sample, though, described play as a "natural way of living" and a means for personal development and expression. The free nature of play was highlighted in this case, and the absence of an active teacher role in this approach to play is worth mentioning. This definition of play seems to be closer to a child's perception of it since, according to Howard et al. (2003), children usually think of an activity as play based on cues such as limited space, whether or not they have choice and control over the activity or whether an adult is present.

Opportunities for free play at school were considered to be fewer compared to structured play and only presented themselves during recess. Although they disagreed about their definition of play, participants did agree about its significance and about the need for more play at school. Most teachers pointed out that there were not enough opportunities for play, which was not surprising provided that education is designed so as to primarily promote learning and not to facilitate play (Samuelson & Carlsson, 2008). As per Stephen, Ellis, and Martlew (2010), most of the play that occurs at school seems to be purposeful and preplanned than spontaneous and free.

None of these approaches to play can be considered superior to any other, since play itself is generally difficult to define mainly because it is difficult to decide what this definition should be based on. For McInnes et al. (2011), the various definitions of play are based on categorizing it, on specific criteria or on a continuum. Indeed, Howard (2009) explains how subjectivity is a big issue even among scholars, who choose to analyze play from different points of view. It can, therefore, be assumed that one's viewpoint is based on their actual attitudes to play rather than merely on chance.

Furthermore, according to the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010), attitudes in general stem from one's cognitive, affective and behavioral traits. Any given attitude to play is an amalgamation of one's education, experience and personality, and their definition of play is most likely to result from the very same mix. The different opinions adults have can be more easily understood in the greater theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), a person's development and consequent attitudes are influenced by their microsystem (immediate environment: family, siblings), their mesosystem (connections of the microsystem: friends, school), their exosystem (influences from the microsystem: parental profession, neighbors) and their macrosystem (societal characteristics: culture, history, economic system, laws). Since those systems are different for everyone, the same goes for their development and attitudes. Participating teachers' answers on how they understand and define play have, therefore, been shaped by the time frame, the mindset, the finances, the family, the teachers, the friends and the preferences they were brought up with.

The context in which play is examined impacts significantly, on how it is perceived (Howard, 2002). Play characteristics and definitions will, therefore, differ depending on whether a given research takes place in a therapeutic setting or in the playground, for example. Accordingly, when the definition of play is looked into from

the standpoint of the school, it is only natural that teachers will look at it from a teaching viewpoint mainly, which brings us to physical and theatre education, art classes and playful teaching. That might explain why some participants chose to dwell on structured and controlled play, contrary to others who chose to focus on free play at recess.

This research reveals that Greek teachers are aware of the benefits of play and its ability to support inclusiveness in the classroom. Social and emotional benefits were highlighted with emotional health, management of emotions, empathy, socialization and team spirit being the most frequent answers. Moreover, these two aspects of development, i.e. emotional and social, seemed to be closely linked to free play, while cognitive and physical development were more connected to structured, adult-led play together with the development of imagination, creativity, language and problem-solving skills. All the benefits participants mentioned are well-evidenced in the literature (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006; Children's Play Intervention Service, 2002; Fearn & Howard, 2012; Lee, Odom, & Loftin, 2007; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012; Papacek, Zhen, & Green, 2015; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

Participants also differed as to how frequently they used play for the purposes of inclusiveness. Most of them said they did use it sometimes, and that more frequent instances of play were hindered by practical problems such as inflexible curricula, lack of appropriate space and lack of sufficient time. Community attitudes to play at school are, possibly, an additional disincentive; Avgitidou (2001) demonstrates that, even though play is generally considered beneficial by the parents, they do not approve of it as part of the formal learning system, and they consider teachers using play in class to be indifferent.

Moyles, Adams, and Musgrove (2002) confirm that, when it comes to play, educators do not do what they say; even when they say that they consider play to be important, they do not use it because they are not sure how to plan for it, support it or make sense of it. McInnes et al. (2011) assume that what causes this discrepancy is the difficulty teachers have in applying play pedagogy in practice; Wood (2007) argues that it is the unpredictable nature of play that makes them reluctant to use it at school. Apparently, the difficulty in controlling play and its outcomes makes it a less popular educational tool.

Participants considered personal attitudes and choices on the part of teachers regarding the frequency of using play in class to be important, which means that they acknowledged the teacher's role and responsibility in that regard.
Concerning the frequency of opportunities for play at school some of the answers read as follows:

> "*Depending on the teacher and on his/her decisions, opportunities to play can be from zero to many*".

"There will be few opportunities for teachers who choose to plan their lesson based on the curriculum only; however, for those who decide to adapt their lesson according to student needs, there can be more opportunities".

Such views challenge the idea of the trapped-in-the-curriculum teacher, highlighting the freedom of choice teachers have in order to offer tailored teaching and to apply new ideas, adjusting their teaching to student needs instead of blindly following the curriculum. In the end, it is a matter of whether one is willing to take full responsibility for their classes and students, instead of shifting it on someone else.

Finally, participants showed little or no intention to discuss the challenges they faced in implementing inclusive education, and to make their own suggestions. Most of the challenges mentioned revolved around factors beyond their control, such as lack of funding for education, curriculum shortcomings and community ignorance. Lack of in-service teacher training was also regarded as something beyond their control because post-initial training in Greece can be a complex issue. Most of such training programs are subject to fees and, may be, not available at all for teachers living and working outside the big cities. Public sector in-service training programs that are offered for free only have a restricted number of places available.

Although they seemed to realize the importance of play for inclusive education, none of the participants suggested that play be introduced or be more used at school. Suggestions only related to practicalities such as free in-service training, hiring more teachers, improving the school premises or changing the curriculum. Obviously, educators have opted once more for not owning up to their own responsibility regarding inclusiveness.

This research brings to the fore the general issues of not accepting responsibility for inclusiveness and being reluctant to adopt a pedagogy of play. The literature on how willing teachers are to assume responsibility for their teaching is rather poor (Eren, 2014); however, it does show that teacher (un)willingness to take responsibility is of critical importance to the quality of education offered (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Henry, Kershaw, Zulli, & Smith, 2012; Sanders, Wright, & Horn, 1997; Schalock, 1998). Many factors come into play when it comes to taking responsibility and being committed to one's duty; for teachers, such factors include motivation, learning capacity, student success, teachers' way of feeling, professional satisfaction, hope for the future and personal attitude to teaching (Eren, 2014; Guskey, 1984; Halvorsen, Lee, & Andrade, 2009; Matteuzzi, 2007).

5. Conclusion

Greek teachers seemed to understand the meaning and the significance of inclusion; they seemed to understand its broad approach which involves people from all minorities and affects life inside and outside the school. Their attitudes towards inclusive education were mixed, mainly because of their different ideologies, education and experience. The medical model of disability was apparent in quite a few of the

answers, and there was also general confusion as to the terminology. Participants had difficulty distinguishing between inclusive education and integration as well as between special and inclusive education.

One of the main obstacles to inclusive education in Greece is terminology. Participants find it hard to make the distinction between special and inclusive education, and they think of integration as the same with inclusive education. This is probably due to the lack of terminological clarity in legislation and in education policy documents (Lachana & Efstathiou, 2015), as well as in the literature in general (Efstathiou, 2014; Kaltsouni, 2013; Papanikolaou, 2014; Zoniou-Sideri, 2005).

As per the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011), the use of coherent, well-documented and commonly accepted language is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of inclusion. Moreover, ideological clarity in the terminology used is crucial, so that the results of the current inclusive strategies can be objectively assessed, and in order for the future steps towards inclusion to be planned accordingly (UNESCO, 2008).

Regarding play, participants appeared to be divided in their views. Most of them believed it to be a structured educational tool but some described it as free activity chosen by the player. However, they all agreed that play has many advantages for children's development and for inclusion at school, despite the fact that there are not many opportunities for play at school. Furthermore, there is a major inconsistency between words and deeds, since they did say that play was important but did not actually use it much in their class.

Obstacles relating to the successful use of play for inclusive education can be classified in three main strands, a) practical difficulties on the part of the school system such as focusing on imparting knowledge rather than on each child, lack of time and space, a strictly inflexible curriculum which is not pro-cooperation neither among teachers nor between teachers and parents, b) unclear terminology and definitions in legislation and in the literature regarding special and inclusive education plus the lack of knowledge about the social nature of disability lead to the shifting of responsibility from general education teachers to "special education teachers", and c) teachers' superficial knowledge of and relationship with play.

Teachers' relationship with play must be researched into in greater depth. So far, research findings (e.g. Lenakakis, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2005) have demonstrated that play in the classroom makes students more positively inclined to learning, helps them attain their cognitive goals, and reduces their anxiety and fear of failure. As a result, the classroom is transformed into a safe setting for personal expression. According to Martlew, Stephens, and Ellis (2011) active learning promotes positive attitudes and enthusiasm, more confidence and independence, and more cooperative skills. A playful approach makes learning more accessible, inclusive and interesting for students.

These findings suggest that teachers must learn about the importance and the role of play in education, in child development and in inclusion. Perceiving play as a less important pastime underestimates the scientific knowledge that play is a serious activity with a crucial role in developing and shaping children's personality. On the

contrary, turning play from a daily joyful activity to school practice risks losing the element of playfulness and, thus, its beneficial outcome. Using play for the purposes of inclusive education takes adults back to the playful experiences of their childhood, updating their emotions, be it processed or not, and connecting them with what children really need.

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