

The Views of Parents Regarding the Impact of the Greek Economic Crisis (Memoranda) on the Field of Special Education

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Abstract: *The social and economic developments (Memorandum) in Greece, during the course of this investigation, are intense and appear to have negatively affected the quality of the educational services provided. The absence of financial budgets and state subsidies have an impact on the work undertaken by educational staff and consequently upon the general functioning of the special education schools. This fact interferes with the quality of the educational services provided, which are included in the relevant legislation of Greece and relates to educational services for students with disabilities and special educational needs. This investigation focuses on studying the views by a sample comprised of eighteen (18) parents whose children are studying at two (2) special education primary schools in Greece, through individual semi-structured interviews on the link between the economic crisis and the quality of the education provided. The words of the parents in our sample highlight the inadequacies and shortcomings of these schools, which appear to weaken their overall smooth operation. It has been found that economic hardship and shortages in teachers, special teachers and support staff, are key factors that restrain the smooth operation of the school, by exacerbating working conditions and increasingly posing institutional obstacles on to the school and the social integration of children with disabilities.*

Keywords: special education, economic crisis, operation of special education schools, parent-teacher interaction

1. Introduction

The legislative framework for special education in Greece is endeavouring to align itself with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of the United Nations that was signed in 2006. According to article 7 in this Convention, “States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children”. According to the current legislation in Greece (Law 3699/2008), at the time of this investigation, the State must take all the necessary steps (e.g. building and logistics infrastructure, school equipment, etc.) to ensure full and equal school and social integration for children with disabilities.

During the school year when we collected our research data (2012-2013), the economic and social developments in Greece were intense, since the second Memorandum had already been passed by the majority of the Greek Parliament. This fact has significantly contributed to reducing social spending as well as shrinking the welfare state, which highlights the link that exists with the educational system, since the economic crisis has had an impact upon the quality of educational services provided, mainly due to the lack of money and state subsidies (Efstathiou, 2017). The Federation of Secondary Education Officers has arrived at a similar conclusion with its presentation of the ETUCE (European Trade Union Confederation, Department of INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL) investigation which was held under the framework of the 2012 campaign within the context of the economic crisis. The specific study has shown that the economic downturn in Greece has led to a set of educational reforms that was mainly concerned with 20% expenditure cuts on education and the abolition of one thousand and fifty three schools.

The investigation that was conducted in 2012 by Action Aid Hellas in Greece, has found that the prevailing socio-economic conditions have equally affected the field of special education. These research findings show that the majority (63%) of parents of children with disabilities define these services as “less satisfactory”, in comparison to the past. It therefore follows that the existing economic situation orients the teaching staff and parents to cooperate and contribute to a smooth functioning of the special education primary schools, with fewer resources than before.

Given the results of these investigations and the current economic situation in Greece, we have focused our attention on studying the views of the parents whose children attend the two (2) special education primary schools that are located in large urban centres of Thrace. We attempted to reveal through their words, the manner in which the specific parents (18) in our sample depict the operating method of the specific schools, their relations with their children’s teachers, as well as their involvement in school events. We selected primary education as the research field because we considered that primary schools are the most significant section of the education system, since it has been established that the early stages of school learning constitute a significant phase for children.

2. Materials and Methods

Through the prior consent of the teachers within the context of conducting this research, we were provided with the opportunity to remain for a long-term at two (2) special education primary schools in Thrace. These are schools that are located in large urban centres, which are attended by thirty six (36) students with multiple and varied types of disabilities.

Our long-term stay at the aforementioned school level has significantly contributed to our familiarisation with both the teachers and the parents at those school units. This fact has facilitated the eighteen (18) individual semi-structured interviews that we conducted with the parents at the specific schools in Thrace, for the purpose of recording and examining the existing school reality, by studying their views.

As far as the process of collecting our research data is concerned, we encountered difficulties in respect of the parental attendance and participation in the research. Despite the fact that all the parents in the specific schools were invited to participate, eighteen (18) parents, representing 60% of the population, responded to our invitation and participated in this investigation.

The quantification of the data has demonstrated that out of the total of the eighteen (18) parents representing their families that agreed to participate in the interviews, mothers (13/18 – 72%) made up the greater part of those that attended with respect to the fathers (5/18 – 28%). According to the analysis of the demographic data, the majority of the parents (12/18 – 67%) in our sample live in rural areas (villages), whilst the remaining parents (6/18 – 33%) reside in large urban centres (cities).

Our research data indicates that the educational level for these parents is inclusive of all the educational levels. More specifically, some parents (5/18 – 28%) have successfully attained a secondary education level, others (4/18 – 22%) have attained a primary education level, whilst others (2/18 – 11%) are High School graduates. It should be noted that certain parents (5/18 – 28%) have attained a post-secondary level education standard (17%) or are Higher / Technical Education graduates (11%). Our sample also includes certain parents (2/18 – 11%) that have also studied under special education structures.

On the basis of the religious convictions for the parents in our sample, it is evident that thirteen (13/18 – 72%) Christian parents and five (5/18 – 28%) Muslim parents attended the interviews. In relation to their financial situation, it appears that the majority of the parents (10/18 – 55%) in our sample are unemployed, whilst the other parents (7/18 – 39%) stated that they are employed in the private or the public sector. It should be noted that certain parents (1/18 – 6%) are outside the labour force, since they are pensioners.

With the consent of the parents in our sample, we conducted the individual semi-structured interviews with voice recordings, since we considered that the interview as a data collection technique allows the researcher to reveal the parents' thought processes regarding the school reality, in the manner that they experience it (Mason, 2002). During the analysis phase we proceeded to the coding, processing and interpretation of the research data through the individual interviews of the parents in our sample, by maintaining the authenticity of what was said (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2007).

3. Results and Discussion

Most of the parents in our sample stressed that the economic crisis has significantly influenced the smooth running of the special education primary schools that are attended by their children. They stressed the inadequacies and deficiencies in respect of which they consider there is no specific education policy tailored for improving special education.

“...OK, matters were generally difficult this year because of the economic crisis and this is evident at every level. It was the most disappointing year at the special school, because everything was under-functioning. Without the economic crisis, matters would certainly have been better.”

“...The difficult economic crisis in Greece has naturally also affected the operations of the special school. The truth is that we do not know what will happen from here on and how the special schools shall be able to cope with the prevailing conditions in Greece.”

Difficulties that are encountered in recruiting teachers, special teachers and support staff

The words of the parents in our sample highlight the deficiencies in significant scientific disciplines at the two (2) special education primary schools in Thrace, such as occupational and speech therapists. We stress that the Greek state has huge responsibilities, since it is unable to cover the deficiencies that have been recorded in respect of teaching staff, which has an adverse impact upon the quality of the education that is provided and in consequently meeting the therapeutic and learning needs of the children attending the specific schools.

“...The economic crisis has also impacted upon the teaching staff at the special school, since all the specialists are not available, such as occupational therapists. Well, what can we say? Unfortunately, there are cutbacks everywhere. The state is responsible, but is completely indifferent and does not care about providing specialists.”

According to our research data, the majority of the teachers that are employed at the two (2) special education primary schools in Thrace do not have a permanent and stable position. Within this context, the schools are staffed by different teaching staff every year, which has an adverse impact on both the quality of the learning and therapeutic services, as well as the quality of the cooperation between the school-based activities.

In the words of the parents in our sample, it would appear that the recruitments occurring on a fixed-term basis (for a short period of time) at a teaching level, as well as a scientific specialist level (occupational therapists, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers, music therapists, physiotherapists, school nurses), is causing disruption to their children, since the children are compelled to adapt to the newly recruited teachers every year. In accordance with the view of the parents, the retention of teachers on fixed-term contracts is not sufficient in terms of time for

developing a meaningful relation between their children and the specific teachers.

“... Here at the special school, they change teachers very regularly, they change the support staff, and they change speech and occupational therapists. The constant changes in the staff at the special school have a significant impact upon the children. By the time that a child becomes accustomed to the new teachers it is Christmas, January then arrives and the school year then ends. Generally, the children with autism have a problem in adapting and it takes half a year to adapt to a new person.”

“... The bad thing with Greece is that by the time teachers become accustomed to the children they have been transferred to another special school. For example, my child’s teacher next year may very well be posted to another city and another teacher will have assumed his/her place. So, half a year will have elapsed before the child becomes accustomed to the new teacher. This is the worst possible thing that can happen to these children.”

The interviews indicate that the recruitment of teachers on a fixed-term basis (for a short period of time) have had an equally negative impact upon the parents in our sample. In accordance with their comments, it would appear that they are encountering significant difficulties in their efforts to adapt to the new teachers at the beginning of every school year, which results in the loss of valuable time until they are able to establish a constructive cooperative relation. They have emphasised that due to this situation, relating to the method for recruiting school personnel, they are compelled to once again narrate the medical and social history of their children. In this way, it has been established that the recruitment of teachers and scientific staff on fixed-term contracts is causing upheaval, anxiety and anger amongst the parents, a fact that inhibits the development of qualitative social interaction between teachers, staff with various specialties and parents.

“...I become nervous and sad when changes are made to the staff at the special school. It is difficult for us as parents, becomes you become very familiar with some teachers during the school year, which may not be at this special school next year. Almost every year, we start again from the beginning.”

“... I am affected by the changes in the teachers at the special school every year. When a new teacher arrives, I need to appraise him/her from the beginning about my child’s entire background. Unfortunately, if the teachers are again changed next year, we will need to again do everything from the beginning. I am basically very anxious about the type of teacher I will encounter every year.”

The parents stress that this situation involving the recruitment of teachers and staff with various scientific specialties on fixed-term contracts, is also having a negative impact upon the teachers themselves. The interviews with the parents in our sample indicate that the continuous

transfers / secondments to different schools is causing upheaval amongst the teachers, since they also need to become acquainted with the pupils in their classrooms and comprehend their needs.

“... This is assuredly also difficult for the teachers, because they need to become familiar with the children from “scratch”. Especially for those children with difficulties, the teacher needs more time to become familiar with them. So half a year will have elapsed before teachers find a way to understand the character of every child in their classroom and then work out how to best convey the lessons.”

The aforementioned conditions that have developed are compelling the parents to consult with private therapists outside the field of special education primary schools, and to consequently bear the high cost for the required therapeutic training of their children.

“... The only solution for my child’s therapy is available through the private sector. I have not seen anything that is state-funded and there are many specialist deficiencies at the special school due to the economic crisis. We need to help our child and this is the only solution.”

Parents want stability in the teaching staff at the special education primary schools

The parents in our sample have expressed their desire for stability amongst the teaching staff in the special education primary schools every new school year. Their comments indicate the need for stability in relation to the teachers that staff these schools.

“... I consider it very important that the staffing at a special school does not change every year. The special schools should have permanent persons on their staff and the school year should commence with all the teachers in their positions.”

The very words by the parents in our sample indicate that the irregular changes to the teaching staff assist both the parents and the children to sense familiarity and security with the teachers (Dale, 1996). These elements are necessary in the process for establishing a relationship of trust amongst teachers, parents and students with disabilities. According to the parents, the sense of familiarity amongst the teaching staff contributes to both establishing a relationship of trust, so that they can discuss issues of concern to them, and the learning development of the children. It has been ascertained that the stability amongst the teaching staff contributes to the better recognition of the needs amongst children with disabilities and consequently to the qualitative guidance and advice to the parents.

“... It is surely implied that a teacher knows a child and its needs well, where she/he has been at the special school for many years. This means that a teacher can better help the child. It accordingly helps me a lot because the teacher can more easily advise me.”

“... These children develop a bond with the person that is involved with them and they need it. I look at my child and understand that when she/he is familiar with someone, she/he will open up, unfold and do things.”

Difficulties that arise with regard to the daily attendance by children with disabilities at the special education primary schools and their return home

According to the current legislation in Greece (Law 3699/2008), the transportation of children to the special education primary schools occurs on either the common routes for school busses belonging to the Unified School Committee Board or with vehicles that are leased by the local Prefectural LGA. Exclusively in relation to the special education schools, it is permitted to purchase or lease school busses with the specialised specifications set by the European Commission. Particular reference is made regarding the staffing of the positions for the drivers and escorts for the children, which are allocated to the special education schools by a decision of the Hellenic Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs. In relation to meeting the costs for operating, repairing, maintaining and insuring the vehicles that have been allocated to the special education schools, this is conducted by the local School Committees, which are funded in relation to this purpose by the appropriate Local Government Authorities.

The discussions with certain parents in our sample indicate the inadequacies by the hereinabove authorities to comply with the competencies that have been assigned to them by the legislative framework in Greece (Law 3699/2008), in relation to covering the expenses required for the routes by school busses and leased taxis that transport students with disabilities. The said parents stress the problems that have arisen at the special education schools where their children are studying, through the delays in allocating the financial subsidies for leasing the school busses and taxis and the cutbacks in the budget for fuels and personnel, which is comprised of the professional drivers for the vehicles, as well as escorts for the students. This fact has generated a great deal of anxiety amongst the parents and in order to assure that their children are transported to and from the special education primary schools, whereby the parents have jointly decided to financially support the schools for their children, with an aim at hiring the required school drivers, as well as the escorts.

“... Look, the impact of the economic crisis is apparent in a lot of things here at the special school. For example, in recent years there have been some issues concerning the transportation of children to and from the special school, as well as the personnel that is required for this job. We needed to rush as parents because there were no funds to have a bus and driver that would transport the children. The state should also ensure that the special school is OK with the school bus timetables, because we even have a problem with the busses. Shouldn't the State and the Prefecture be responsible for doing something?”

Building infrastructure at the special education primary schools regarding the safety of the buildings and heating of the rooms

The majority of the parents in our samples have stated that the economic crisis in Greece has had an impact upon meeting the extraordinary and regular expenses for the special education primary schools where their children are studying. They have stressed that the reduction in the subsidies have had a direct impact upon the organisation of school events, the repairs to the building infrastructure, adequacy of writing materials, as well as equipping the schools with cleaning products. The parents in question have stressed the poor workmanship exhibited by the internal areas of the special education primary schools, as well as the lack of suitability by certain rooms for conducting therapies for the children. They have stressed the indifference by the responsible parties for resolving these problems, namely the systematic maintenance of the buildings where their children are accommodated. In accordance with the comments by the parents, the teaching staff has invited the members of the parents associations at the specific special education primary schools to primarily financially support (due to the reduction in the state subsidies), and to also provide their personal exertion (according to the knowhow available to the parents), for the purpose of improving the operations of these schools.

“... The specific building that now houses the special school had been closed for ten years and has sustained a lot of wear and tear. However, some simple patching up has occurred due to the economic crisis, which is apparently inadequate to cover all the poor workmanship.”

“... This year was the most disappointing year for the special school, because they told us that there won't be many funds due to the economic crisis and first of all with the cleaning products, whereby they asked us parents to bring whatever we could. On a couple of occasions, the special school also asked the parents to bring plain paper for the printer.”

The interviews also reveal the impact by the economic crisis on matters pertaining to the heating of the two (2) primary schools in our sample. The said issue is of vital significance for certain parents, who stress that the absence of heating is precarious to the health of their children. The parents stress that certain special education primary schools are housed in old buildings, which had been abandoned in the past and were then assigned to the special education primary schools. In their opinion, the absence of maintenance to the old buildings contributes to deficient and unsatisfactory heating of the school rooms and the internal areas of the schools where their children are studying. They emphasise the impact of the prevailing economic situation in Greece, with regards to the purchase of fuel by the specific special education primary schools.

“... This year, we have had a serious problem with the heating. The fuel is in very short supply. Most children were sick this year, because they can't move like other children, which can run and warm themselves. For example, the children in wheelchairs

all have to wear coats. Is it not a shame that they should fall ill? We accordingly have so much to deal with and now we have to deal with the flu?"

"... Due to the economic crisis we are experiencing, there has been a serious problem with the heating, because the school does not have the funds to buy fuel. You can see that now at eleven am, we are wearing coats inside the school and consider it normal under the prevailing conditions in Greece."

4. Conclusion

The interviews highlight the views by the parents in our sample regarding the impact by the economic crisis (memorandum) on the overall operations of the special education primary schools in Thrace. It has been found through the analysis of the three basic pillars (teaching staff, building facilities and student transportation) that the parents have perceived the majority of the dysfunctions by these school campuses as being due to the economic crisis and the reduced interest on the part of the State regarding special education. Their comments highlight the inadequacies and shortcomings for the special education primary schools in Thrace, which are negatively affecting the educational and therapeutic services provided.

More specifically, the parents in our sample have stressed the lack of money and funds, since the cutbacks are impacting upon the adequate staffing of the special education primary schools in terms of teaching and support staff. The deficiencies in the specialities inhibits the coverage of the teaching and therapeutic needs for students with disabilities, which results in parents being compelled to resort to private therapists and shouldering the high cost for the services provided, in order to provide the necessary treatment for their children. Within this context, the parents propose the timely and adequate staffing of the special education primary schools with the necessary staff, which shall be governed by stability (permanent placement), so that the stakeholders involved (teachers, parents and students) may derive a sense of security and confidence.

The parents in our sample were equally placed in relation to the building facilities for the special education primary schools in Thrace. They emphasise that the unsuitable building facilities and the inadequate heating results in a number of negative consequences upon the pedagogical relations between teacher and student, as well as the psychosomatic health and safety of the student population. It has been found that the deficient funding resulting from the economic crisis (memoranda) is hindering the operation of the said school campuses and is consequently hindering the coverage of the learning and social needs by students with disabilities.

The interviews with the parents in our sample have equally highlighted the inadequacy of the Local Government Authority's response to meeting the required expenses for transporting the students to and from the special education primary schools in Thrace. The economic crisis and consequential absence of funds for ensuring the

transportation of children to the schools has created problems to the general operations by the specific schools.

In accordance with the discussions with the parents in our sample, it has been found that the operations of the special education primary schools in Thrace have been adversely affected by both the economic crisis (memorandum), as well as the absence of coordination between the stakeholders involved (e.g. Local Government Authority, Primary Education Directorate, etc.). The hereinabove prevailing conditions appear to be inconsistent with the more general provisions of the current legislative framework in Greece, which has resulted in weakening the capacity by the specific school campuses to respond to the multiple and varied needs of the student population. In this manner, the learning progress by children with disabilities is inhibited, as well as the consequential prospect for their effective and equitable integration into society.

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