Greek teachers’ belief systems about disability and inclusive education

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This paper is based on the argument that dominant beliefs and their associated assumptions are a core area of exploration in understanding the process of change and the politics of resistance in education. It commences with an analysis of the role, function and importance of beliefs in the development of special-inclusive education and continues with the exploration of Greek teachers’ beliefs about disability and inclusion. The insights offered in an analysis of a particular national case study, while not comparative as such, can contribute to the international quest for understanding of the deep structures of beliefs and assumptions upon which surface structures of day-to-day practices in the organization and operation of schools are based.

Introduction

Inclusion and inclusive education are concerned with the quest for equity, social justice, participation, and the removal of all forms of exclusionary assumptions and practices. It is based on a positive view of difference and has at its heart the principle that all pupils, including those who are ‘different’, are considered to be valued and respected members of the school community. As such, they contribute to the social structures of the school, to the curriculum and to the strategies used by teachers to teach all children. From this perspective, inclusive education is a complex process that requires a social view of disability and a deconstruction of ‘special educational needs’ as well as the restructuring and reorganization of each mainstream school and its curriculum and management structures in order to provide a culture and practice in which all barriers to participation can be identified and ultimately removed.

During the last decades, one can find in different countries a number of stated intentions and written policies to move towards the achievement of more inclusive school
Within this context, ‘redesigning regular education support’ has been on the agenda in many countries since the 1970s; different designs have been put into practice and some have functioned well as instruments to support mainstreaming. However, these efforts have not fostered inclusive education, but rather the expansion of special education ideas and practices into regular education, most likely with the effect of impeding otherwise requested reforms in regular education settings.

Recent analysis, based on two sets of statistical data reported for 14 European countries, has shown that inclusion has not gained much ground in the Western European region over the period examined (early-to-late 1990s). In fact, Vislie (2003, p. 29) maintains that: according to our data, it seems that special education practices have lost little ground in the 1990s. Other data from the same period support this conclusion and even strengthen the picture of special education as a growing field in European education.

Thus, the problem/challenge today is not the function of special schools but the emergence and reproduction of special education paradigms and rituals in regular education. Traditionally, some advocates for inclusive schooling have argued that requiring all students to be included in the regular classroom would force educators to change their values, assumptions, beliefs and practices about education (Stainback et al., 1989). It was assumed that regular educators would take ownership and ensure that all children have an appropriate education so that a special structure for disabled children would be unnecessary (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). Cook & Slee (1993) went further by stating that disability is not to be overcome by changing attitudes towards ‘the disabled’ and allowing them to ‘spend time’ with our children. Making schools places for girls required a reconstruction of curriculum, pedagogy and school organization.

So too for people with disabilities. But then again, in a way, we turn back to attitudes and more accurately to the underlying beliefs and assumptions upon which certain attitudes and practices are based. As Drudy & Lynch (1993) and McDonnell (2003) have so powerfully shown, any attempt to understand surface structures of day-to-day practices in the organization and operation of schools necessitates first and foremost an understanding of the
values, assumptions and beliefs upon which surface structures are based. According to their analysis, one can think of educational systems as having two different structural levels: deep structures of theories, values, assumptions and beliefs, and surface structures of day-to-day practices. Inevitably, surface structures receive the most attention with regard to research and commentary since they reflect the more visible features of schooling – the content of curriculum, the allocation of pupils to particular programmes, the methodologies of teaching, the distribution of resources, etc. However, these surface features depend on a conceptual framework that is often taken for granted and which is subject to far less scrutiny. For instance, in Cook and Slee’s paradigm, it is important to remind ourselves that with regard to gender inequality the language of rights and entitlements emerged out of acknowledging the existence of gender bias in the educational system, whereas, in the area of disability, educational inequalities have been justified on the basis of biological inequalities.

Role, function, and importance of beliefs and their associated assumptions

A careful examination of everyday educational practices reveals that too many actions are based on certain beliefs which in turn, are based on a number of ‘inarticulate key assumptions’ that are often taken for granted. Indicatively, we refer to some of these key assumptions that have traditionally and predominantly informed the development of certain belief systems upon which current action is based:

Key assumptions surrounding the area of education:

- Assumption: the purpose of schooling in a democracy is to allow children to progress based on their own ability and talent, i.e. meritocratically.
- Assumption: achievement in school rests predominantly in the hands of the individual student.
- Assumption: individuals are motivated to achieve institutional objectives by incentives.
- Assumption: educational achievement is enhanced by competition and comparative assessment of student, schools and schools districts (for further analysis, see Astuto, 1995).
Key assumptions about ability and success:

- Assumption: pupils who do not possess the required abilities, in the required amounts, at the required age, are expected to have limited educational and career prospects.
- Assumption: success in education is the product of individual ability and effort.
- Assumption: lack of success is the product of the limitations and incapacities of the individual pupil.
- Assumption: those who are successful due to their IQ + Effort deserve to be rewarded (for further analysis, see McDonnell, n.d.).

Key assumptions that ground the field of special education:

- Assumption: disabilities are pathological conditions that students have.
- Assumption: disability is the direct consequence of impairment.
- Assumption: doctors or experts know best.
- Assumption: differential diagnosis is objective and useful.
- Assumption: progress results from incremental technological improvements in diagnosis and instructional interventions (for further analysis, see Skrtic, 1991).

Key assumptions about special-segregated provision:

- Assumption: special provision is essential in order to provide the type of education disabled children need.
- Assumption: special units are necessary on administrative efficiency grounds. Thus, specialist teachers, equipment, support services are most effectively deployed.
- Assumption: disabled children and young people need protection from the harsh and cruel realities of the world including those to be found in mainstream schools – their size, the attitudes of staff and peers, verbal and physical abuse, etc.
- Assumption: special units are staffed by teachers who have those necessary qualities of patience, dedication and love. Such units provide good interpersonal relationships with staff and the necessary staff–pupil ratios (for further analysis, see Barton, n.d.)

From the point of view of inclusive education, the above key assumptions and beliefs surrounding disability, special education and education are extremely restrictive, exclusionary and disabling in both their nature, structure and consequence. Their
acceptance, maintenance and perpetuation during the 20th century was to a great extent responsible for many of the ‘wrong’ turnings in the development of special and more recently inclusive education. At the same time, however, their acceptance and perpetuation in the process of redesigning regular education support is indicative of their powerfulness which, in turn, has been rested in their implicit influence on people’s actions.
Sergiovanni & Starratt’s (1988) ‘onion skin’ model of culture depicts the implicit and powerful way wherewith beliefs and assumptions influence surface actions and practices. According to their model of culture, the central element is the belief system and outwards from this is the value system, then the norms and standards and, at the outer level, are the patterns of behaviour that are shared. The belief systems are at the deepest level and consist of assumptions and understandings held by the people in context. Belief systems influence the value systems since it is the belief system that underpins the value systems. Similarly value systems, those things considered important and held in high regard by the groups, will influence the norms and standards, which in turn influence patterns of behaviour.
Within the same line of thought, Brickner (1995) refers to the concept of first- and second-order change to categorize different types of obstacles as first- and second-order barriers to change. First-order changes ‘adjust’ current practice to make it more effective or efficient, leaving underlying beliefs unchallenged. Second-order changes confront beliefs about current practice and lead to new goals, structures or roles. First-order barriers to inclusive education can be described as being extrinsic to teachers and include a number of external factors that influence the implementation of inclusive education. Attitudinal research has been extremely valuable in terms of indicating a number of important first-order barriers that policy-makers should take into serious consideration if there is a sincere commitment to promote more inclusive practices (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). At the same time, however, attitudinal research is quite restrictive and restricted in terms of exploring the second-order barriers to inclusive education. Although many first-order barriers may be eliminated by securing additional resources and providing extended instructional skills training,
confronting second-order barriers requires challenging one’s belief systems. Second-order barriers are ‘intrinsic’ to teachers and include beliefs about teaching and learning,
beliefs about success and failure, beliefs about normality and disability, established classroom practices, and unwillingness to change. For instance, it has been shown that teachers’ positive attitudes towards inclusion are associated with high levels of perceived efficacy in inclusive classrooms. Personal efficacy is raised when teachers use skills that they experience as making a difference in student learning. Regular education teachers in inclusive settings may be experiencing success in teaching students with disabilities, thereby increasing their feelings of efficacy. However, it may also be that these teachers’ pre-existing belief systems made it easier for them to accept students with disabilities and feel successful with them (Minke & Bear, 1996).

A social constructivist perspective on teachers’ beliefs acknowledges that teachers have their ideals and this knowledge influences their actions in the implementation of inclusive schooling. It also acknowledges that this happens within a social and cultural context of the school and the community (Carrington, 1999).

The movement towards inclusive education has provided opportunities to develop more effective methods for teaching students with diverse learning needs and regular educators have needed to assume a greater responsibility for the education of all students in their classrooms. However, the effects of these changes in education can be exacerbated when educators are expected to accept new policies and practices without consideration given to their individual beliefs, rights and interests-at-hand (Vlachou, 1997; Carrington, 1999). For instance, in Greece the more recent policies on intercultural education promoted a new approach of viewing all school classes as a non-homogeneous entities taking into consideration a number of social, ethnic, cultural and religious differences. It also promoted the idea of searching for pedagogical methods and teaching techniques for a response to the heterogeneity of the needs presented in the class. Research, however, showed that a significant minority (40%) of teachers was found to be in disagreement with the official stated ideological goals of school, regretting the loss of the traditional monocultural values of the triptych ‘fatherland–religion–family’, which they considered as the foundation of all education. Only a minority of 5% among teachers were facing critically the educational reality and tried to innovate their teaching approaches (Frederikou & Folerou, 1991).

The above example indicates that school reformers needed to consider not only changes to the curriculum and the methods for assessing its impact, but also teachers’ fundamental beliefs and knowledge (Gerber, 1994).

Based on the above reasoning the following discussion will focus on the insights
offered in a nation-wide study which aimed to explore Greek teachers’ beliefs about disability and inclusive education. We used the term disability instead of special educational needs because (1) our aim was to explore teachers’ beliefs about the inclusion of pupils with impairment(s), and (2) wittingly, we avoid the highly problematic notion of special needs; a term which throughout its extensive use within discourses at different levels (i.e. bureaucratic, legislative, educational, administrative and so on), has been used to refer to children who have or may not have an impairment. Thus, the term ‘special needs’ has been ultimately defined as disability.

Even in cases where an impairment is not present. We believe that this is a highly political act as it further reduces the exploration of the social context of learning (for further analysis, see Barton & Tomlinson, 1984; Fulcher, 1989; and Vlachou, 1997).

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The sample of the study was drawn from ten (10) different regions, both urban and rural of the South, North, East and Western parts of Greece, including mainland as well as insular areas. The sample consisted of 641 general education teachers (38.8% males and 61.2% females) employed in pre-school (21.2%), primary (42.5%) and secondary education (36.4%). The vast majority of teachers (62.8%) had up to 10 years of teaching experience in regular education classrooms, while 36% had between 10 and 20 years of experiences. In terms of their educational degree, most of the teachers (43.9%) had a 4-year university degree, while 31.9% of mainly pre-school and primary education teachers had a degree from a teachers’ academy (a 2-year study). With regards only to pre-school and primary education teachers, an additional 16.4% had upgraded their education by attending a specific programme of 2 years study for gaining a university equivalent degree. Further, from the total sample of teachers only 7.1% had a Master’s degree in education while 0.6% had a PhD. A description of teachers’ demographic characteristics is provided in Table 1.

**Methods**

Based on previous theoretical work (Skrtic, 1991; Astuto, 1995; Minke & Bear, 1996) a self-administered questionnaire was designed, by the authors of this paper, and administered to a sample of 641 regular education teachers of all levels of education.
The questionnaire consisted of two major parts: the first part included a set of questions concerning beliefs about inclusive education and the second part referred to beliefs about disability. The first part enclosed closed questions concerning general conceptualization issues of inclusion, consequences of inclusion in terms of the child and in terms of the teacher and regular education peers, as well as practical/functional issues of inclusion. In the second part, broad beliefs about disability were measured by a set of questions, which explored teachers’ definitions of inclusion and disability, as well as emotions and ascribed images in relation to disability.

Statistical analysis

Data were analysed using frequencies, cross-tabs and Chi-square tests. Frequencies were calculated for all categorical measures in both broad themes. Furthermore, relationships were explored between all categorical variables and the level of education that the teachers offered their services and the existence of experience with disabled pupils. For this analysis, we used cross-tabs and Chi-square tests. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to evaluate the significance of these tests. It is worthwhile to note that the analysis was extended to explore differences in teachers’ beliefs based on other demographic variables such as gender, age, degree in education and years of teaching experience. In these results no significant differences were identified and thus, were omitted from the discussion.

Results

According to the results of the study, even though the vast majority (72%) of the regular education teachers who participated in the study had between six and over twenty years of teaching experience, only approximately half of the sample (46.5%) indicated that during these years they had an actual experience of educating disabled pupils (pupils with impairments) in their ordinary classes. A Chi-square analysis indicated that prior experience of educating disabled children in ordinary classes was significantly related to the level of education that teachers worked $\chi^2(2, n = 624) = 29.586, p < 0.05$. In particular, secondary education teachers, probably due to lack of special schools and units at this level of education, seemed to have more prior experience of teaching

Table 1. Teachers’ demographic characteristics

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Gender:
Female 392 61.2
Male 249 38.8

Degree in education:
Bachelor 278 43.9
Two-year Academy 202 31.9
University Equivalence Programme 104 16.4
Masters’ 45 7.1
PhD 4 0.6

Level of schooling employed:
Preschool teachers 135 21.2
Primary Education teachers 271 42.5
Secondary Education teachers 232 36.4

Years of teaching experience:
1–5 175 27.3
6–10 227 35.5
11–15 222 34.7
16–20 8 1.3
> 20 3 0.5

Almost all of the teachers (93.4%) stated that they would accept a disabled pupil in their ordinary classroom and about 75.7% believed that a disabled child can be educated in an ordinary school setting. At the same time, however, 41.5% of the teachers, who claimed that disabled children can be educated in ordinary education and 44% of the teachers who claimed that they would accept a disabled child in their classrooms believed that it would be better if disabled children were educated at a
special education setting. Teachers’ preferences for special-segregated schooling were found to be statistically related to the level of education that they were teaching $\chi^2(4, n = 568) = 11.572, p < 0.05$. In particular, secondary education teachers seemed to choose special-segregated education more frequently than their pre-school and primary education colleagues. Teachers who preferred special-segregated education believed that inclusion in ordinary classrooms would not bring any benefits to disabled pupils in terms of their cognitive, social and psychological development. A further analysis revealed that teachers’ expressed acceptance intermingled with a philanthropic approach to disabled individuals. In particular, more than half of the participants (57.5%) believed that a teacher who includes disabled children in his/her class should be characterized by philanthropic feelings, while they themselves indicated that disabled people sensitize them much more than any other marginalized group. They stated that feelings of uneasiness, sympathy, compassion and benevolence arose when they encountered a disabled individual. Within the same line of thought, they believed that in case they had a disabled pupil in their class they would be more ‘tolerant’ in terms of both their evaluations as well as their sanctions towards the child.

However, teachers’ initial acceptance and ‘tolerance’ of disabled pupils in their classrooms declined when they were asked to respond to a hypothetical situation of choosing between different classes in which different categories of children were included. Teachers were prone to choose classes that included children of different cultural, ethnic, linguistic and/or religious backgrounds rather than the ones where disabled children were included. Teachers’ expressed choices were significantly related to the existence of prior teaching experience with disabled pupils. In particular, teachers without any prior experience of teaching disabled pupils in their classrooms were less positive in the process of choosing a class where a disabled child was included. Further, their responses indicated that the degree of their acceptance was further influenced by the nature and severity of different impairments. In particular, teachers were prone to accept physically disabled and blind children in their classrooms than mentally disabled, deaf and hard of hearing children, while children with multiple disabilities were least accepted by teachers. Figure 1 shows teachers’ responses in terms of their agreement or disagreement to teach in different classes in
which different categories of minority/different than the norm children were included.

As far as inclusive education was concerned, teachers believed that inclusion involves adapting the existing curricula to children needs (48.7%), small class size (55.1%), in-classroom support (37.2%), remedial support (25.4%) as well as the existence of parallel classrooms (20.9%). A number of specialists were believed to be responsible for the implementation of inclusive education with the major emphasis placed on the role and responsibility of special educators (87.6%), psychologists (65.4%), speech–therapists (34.3%) and only half of the participants believed that in addition to the above specialists, ordinary teachers as well were to be responsible for the education/inclusion of disabled pupils.

According to teachers’ responses, the inclusion of disabled pupils in their classrooms would not hinder their work (83.8%). However, inclusion was perceived as a challenge to them, which according to 69.8% of the sample, would increase their

Figure 1. Teachers’ agreement/disagreement to teach different groups of students: (a) blind children and children with visual impairments, (b) physically disabled children, (c) children with multiple disabilities, (d) children from different ethnic backgrounds, (e) deaf and hard of hearing children, (f) children from different religious backgrounds, (g) mentally disabled children, and (h) children from different cultural backgrounds
responsibilities and workload. Almost half of the participants (48.4%) believed that a teacher who includes disabled children in his/her class should get extra pay, indicating that they should be paid for the ‘extra work’ required. Chi-square tests indicated that teachers’ beliefs concerning the importance of extra payment were related, in a statistically significant way, to their educational level of teaching $\chi^2(4, n = 599) = 12.608, p < 0.05$. In particular, pre-school and primary education teachers were stronger towards this belief in comparison to their secondary education colleagues. Teachers also believed that inclusion would not broaden the existing curricula and would not affect – either positively or negatively – peers’ academic achievement. Positive effects of inclusion were mainly associated, by some teachers (36.7%), with the improvement of pupils’ interpersonal relationships. As far as benefits for disabled children were concerned, the vast majority of teachers believed that socialization (86.9%) and social acceptance (78.5%) could be the major benefits of inclusion while only a minority of teachers believed that disabled pupils would benefit in terms of their cognitive development or the development of their career prospects.

Even though half of the participants believed that inclusive education within the Greek reality was mainly the result of external influences, such as the wider European educational directives, at the same time a number of participants believed that inclusion is an interdisciplinary approach to education and a means of (1) improving the way ordinary school functions as well as (2) reducing the marginalization and stigmatization of disabled people. Figure 2 indicates teachers’ beliefs of what inclusion is within the Greek educational reality.

However, the importance of inclusion did not automatically mean the elimination of the assumed importance of special-segregated education. In fact, almost half of the teachers believed that special-segregated schools are important as a means of providing a secure and protective ‘shelter’ to disabled children. This, belief was associated with a particular way of viewing disabled children as ‘self-isolated from the wider community’, as ‘unable to cater for themselves’ and as ‘needy of our help’. At the
same time, however, special-segregated education was perceived to be important as a way of covering the deficiencies of ordinary education such as: (1) inability of ordinary schools to respond effectively to disabled children’s needs, (2) inaccessible school environments and (3) rigid curricula. A further minority of teachers (17.6%) believed that special schools are important because they allow for the smooth functioning of ordinary classes.

Discussion
The results of the study revealed that regular education teachers hold a number of restrictive as well as conflicting beliefs towards disability and inclusive education. According to teachers’ beliefs, inclusive education is necessary as a means of improving the way ordinary school functions and reducing the marginalization and stigmatization of disabled people. At the same time, however, they believed that special segregated education is important as a means of providing a secure and protective ‘shelter’ to disabled children and as a way of covering a number of ordinary education’s deficiencies. This contradiction has to be approached in relation to (1) the broader system of beliefs that teachers hold towards disability and inclusive education and (2) the context within which certain beliefs have been developed.

As far as inclusion is concerned, the results of the study revealed that (1) more than half of the regular-education teachers, of all levels, did not have any prior experience of educating disabled children in their ordinary classes, (2) teachers hold a quite confusing interpretation of what inclusion means, while (3) a number of teachers believed that, within the Greek reality, inclusion is the result of external European influences and directives. These results project a number of important issues concerning the history, development and current state of special-inclusive education in Greece. The long history of segregation at all levels has made inclusive education difficult and not a natural evolution based on the national school experience and the needs of internal educational forces. In particular, while in other Western countries the development of special education, integration and more recently inclusion, has been the outcome of the active participation of disabled people, their parents and their organizations, in Greece international influence and imitation has been the major contributing factors towards this development. All major changes have
occurred through administrative rather than as an outcome of the pressure of the people involved (Lampropoulou & Padeliadou, 1995).

Figure 2. Teachers’ beliefs of what inclusion is within the Greek educational reality: (a) a European directive, (b) a cheap alternative to special education, (c) a means of improving the way ordinary school functions, (d) a means of decompressing special schools, (e) an interdisciplinary approach to education, and (f) a means of reducing the marginalization and stigmatization of disabled people.

Additionally, the notions of special/segregated provision (1981 Act) and integration (1985 Act) were officially introduced within the same decade generating social and practical confusion as to what equality of opportunity in the area of special needs means. This political confusion has been strengthened even further by the fact that even though the Acts of 1985 and 2000 introduced a more inclusive ideology, they lacked any basic specifications and programmes that would promote its implementation (Zoniou-Sideri, 2000). Thus, currently inclusive education is strongly associated with the development and expansion of special classes and resource units in ordinary schools while the in-classroom support model is almost non-existent. At the same time, equality of opportunity in education for disabled pupils means the development of special, even segregated, provision and this can partly explain (1) why a substantial
number of schools have not yet reached the point of locational integration and (2) why almost half of the teachers who stated that disabled children can be educated at an ordinary school simultaneously believed that it would be better for the above mentioned children to be educated in special-segregated settings.

It was also revealed that regular education teachers hold a quite restrictive belief concerning the benefits of inclusive education for disabled pupils. The vast majority of teachers believed that socialization and social acceptance could be the major benefits of inclusion while only a minority of teachers believed that disabled pupils will benefit in terms of their cognitive development or the development of their career prospects (also Zoniou-Sideri et al., 2004). This belief influences, and is being influenced by, another set of beliefs according to which inclusive education will not broaden the existing curricula and will not affect peers’ academic achievement (also Zoniou-Sideri et al., 2004). These sets of beliefs simplify the complex process of inclusion and are directly associated with disabled students rather than with the organization and operation of existing curricula and pedagogies for all the children involved. From this perspective, inclusion is a ‘good thing’, a ‘beneficial process’, on the basis that disabled children are offered the opportunity of mixing socially with their peers within an ordinary environment. Such an emphasis on only the social and moral benefits of inclusion, often influenced by a charitable type of humanism, hinders the translation of this moral commitment into the assertion of rights. It has already been reported, that an emphasis on the social and moral dimension of inclusion, often at the expense of inclusive pedagogical curricula, creates certain expectations at the expense of others and raises doubts about the responsibility of the school to educate all children (Vlachou, 1997).

Thus, it was not of a surprise to find that a substantial number of teachers, who claimed that they would accept a disabled child in their class, at the same time, believed that it would be better for the child to be educated at a special-segregated setting. In a cyclical process, the importance of special-segregated settings was based again on teachers’ beliefs that disabled children will not benefit from inclusion in terms of their cognitive, social and psychological development. While this belief in itself perpetuates segregated structures, simplifies the process of inclusion and hinders the development of alternative practices, at the same time, considering the way ordinary schools function, it might also be an expression of a sincere concern.
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regarding the ‘benefits’ that disabled children will gain out of their placement/education in ordinary classes.

A critical analysis of the organization and operation of the Greek educational system reveals that the way ordinary schools function is to a great extent exclusive not only for disabled but for the non-disabled pupils as well. In particular, Greek schools are obliged to follow a common school policy, a strict academically oriented national curriculum, the same instructional guidelines, the same textbooks, and an almost identical timetable. What emerges from the above is a very consistent picture regarding school management, resources, curriculum content and teaching arrangements across the country (Papadopoulos, 1997). Although this uniformity partly reflects recent political rhetoric towards strengthening equality and establishing democratization and modernization of education, it also demonstrates the unwillingness of an inflexible and under-resourced system to negotiate educational processes and outcomes and meet the diverse needs of its pupils (Vlachou & Zoniou-Sideri, 2000). The overloaded syllabuses, the resource deficiencies and the reluctance of teachers to adapt new approaches have perpetuated the emphasis on a didactic pedagogy, where the teacher is in charge, pupils are working alone, and learning is undifferentiated and structured along factual predetermined content (Matsagouras & Riding, 1996). Assessment often emphasizes skills and fragmented knowledge retrieval and is mainly used to stimulate academic performance and competition among peers. Within this context, there are many instances where disabled pupils are required to attend the regular classroom due to lack of any suitable special education facilities. In these cases, disabled pupils and pupils with special educational needs, with very little or no support at all, confront an educational system that is unable to adjust to their differences.

Given the way ordinary schools function, it was a surprise to find out that almost all teachers would accept to educate disabled children in their ordinary classes. This unanimously stated acceptance must be approached with caution since the results of a previous study have indicated that one out of five teachers were found to provide absolutely no assistance when confronted with pupils who were characterized as having special educational needs – not even to mention disabled pupils – in their classes (Lampropoulou & Padeliadou, 1995).

Probably, teachers working in regular education schools feel that school inclusion
does not involve them directly since the discussion of integration, and more recently of inclusion, has been developing and taking place mostly among the special education teachers and related professionals (Padiadou & Lampropoulou, 1997). Therefore, since they do not feel it is going to happen in their classrooms, they may respond purely idealistically, based more, as it was indicated, on a philanthropic approach to disabled individuals, who were perceived as ‘needy’ of society’s help.

Further, the regular education teachers in Greece, especially at the primary school level, have a long experience of integration in the format of resource rooms and special classes, where the responsibility falls completely with the special education teacher. Thus, they perceive that in case of inclusion the responsibility will also fall to a specialist. This was evident in the expressed beliefs of the participants according to which other specialists (i.e. special educators and psychologists) were held to be responsible for the implementation of inclusive practices. Additionally, while almost all teachers stated that they would accept a disabled child in their classes, and while according to teachers’ beliefs disabled people sensitise them more than other marginalized groups, at the same time the vast majority of the participants were prone to choose classes that included children of different cultural, ethnic, linguistic and/or religious backgrounds rather than the ones where disabled children were included. Acceptance was further declined when particular groups of disabled children were included. Given the consistency of this trend both across countries and across time, governments wishing to promote inclusive education for all children have a difficult task in convincing their educators about the feasibility of the policy (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Conclusion
The aim of this paper was not to reach any final conclusions, but to begin a discussion concerning the role, function, and importance of beliefs and their associated assumptions in the process of promoting or hindering more inclusive practices. A number of restrictive and disabling beliefs and ‘inarticulate’ assumptions were presented while, at the same time, the discussion endeavoured to explore the reason(s) behind the powerfullness of a number of beliefs that seem to dominate the development of special and, more recently, inclusive education.

Further, while focused on the results of a particular national study, it was indicated
that Greek teachers hold a number of restricted and restrictive beliefs such as (1) inclusive education will not broaden the existing curricula, (2) inclusive education does not affect ordinary peers, (3) other than the ordinary teachers, specialists are responsible for the implementation of inclusive practices, (4) disabled children would not benefit from inclusive education in terms of their cognitive development and the development of their career prospects, (5) inclusive education is not feasible for all children, (6) segregated schools are important in terms of providing a secure shelter for disabled children, and (7) disabled children can not cater for their own-self and, thus, they are needy of society’s help. Such beliefs perpetuate segregated structures, simplify the process of inclusion and hinder the development of alternative practices.

At the same time, however, such beliefs project a number of important issues concerning the existing political, social and educational context within which particular systems of beliefs have been developed and established.

Considering that the emphasis on beliefs (and their associated assumptions) towards particular socio-political and educational issues is an extremely complex and untidy project, we recognize that there are limitations to this kind of questionnaire study, as a means to get a ‘deep structure’ of beliefs and values. For instance, participants’ responses to the questionnaire may reflect surface and routine ways of thinking and thus dialogue over a longer period is required to explore deeper values and beliefs as well as to understand the process of change and the politics of resistance in education. Additionally, there is a need to widen the scope of the analysis and include not only teachers’ beliefs towards inclusive education, but also teachers’ beliefs and dominant political assumptions concerning teaching and learning, success and failure, normality and disability. Studies of this nature carry the potential of deepening our understanding of the complexities of inclusion, and provide directions for change or continuity of provision as appropriate for the education of all children.

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