

EMBRACE

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Fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in early childhood education and care

National Report



Author:



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NATIONAL REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

Pre-school and pre-primary systems are the two distinct age-based organisational units that constitute the development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The Ministry of Labor, Welfare, and Social Insurance is responsible for the day nurseries and childminders that make up the pre-school system, Contrastingly, kindergartens that are subcategorized into the purview of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, and Youth, compromise the pre-primary system. Children in preschool who are autistic or have hearing impairments are partially incorporated into the regular educational system by being assigned to special units connected to nurseries and primary schools, as well as spending some time in regular classes. An exemption to the integration policy is granted for kids who have serious physical, mental, or emotional issues. To promote social integration between the two, every effort is made to strengthen the connections between the regular and special schools.

Children from birth to age five are welcome in day nurseries, as there are day-care centres that are public, communal, and private. In collaboration with the Parents' Association and the municipal authorities for the area where the institution is located, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance establishes public day nurseries. In addition, according to various findings, the majority of pupils (82.3 percent) who attended ECEC for at least one year enrolled in those programs when they were 3 years old (30.82 percent). However, there are many parents that rely on private day-care, as in 2016–17, 53% of children enrolled in ECEC attended public facilities, while 47% attended private ones. Cyprus primarily relies on informal settings or private institutions, especially for children under 3 years old, of whom 28.2 percent attended ECEC in 2017 (EU average: 34.4 percent) (Rentzou, 2018).

2. FINDINGS FROM THE DESK RESEARCH

According to the initial desk research, it was identified that there are a few principal courses and degrees an individual can follow to ensure that they have received the adequate amount of knowledge, in order to collaborate with children with intellectual disabilities. Initially, the first finding elaborated on a degree from the College of Larnaca, in which it provides a variety of courses that compromise receiving the adequate degree for Early Childhood Education. Similarly,

another university in Cyprus, the European University of Cyprus, also offers an Early Childhood Education degree, but with the additional component of practical experience. The students assigned in this course will participate in nurseries, day-care facilities, and kindergartens as part of their teaching practice.

Moreover, another degree offered by the European University of Cyprus in partnership with the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens' Pedagogical Department of Primary Education, is the master degree in Special and Inclusive Education. During this course, students will become accommodated with a variety of disabilities and gain the opportunity to learn empirical techniques, as to how to integrate these children into society. Furthermore, another practice offered to help ECEC educators gain knowledge about ECEC and children with intellectual disabilities, is the information provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth.

The directorate respects and recognizes each child's diversity as well as their fundamental right to education, is to ensure equal access and participation in education for all children without discrimination or exclusion. Within the framework defined by existing legislation and relevant regulations, and on the basis of European and international standards, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports supports children with disabilities or other special educational needs in every way possible, allowing them to maximise their academic and social development, making it easier for them to adapt to the school environment and integrate into the wider social community.

Moreover, another national policy is the Legislative Framework for Education, that incorporates the "National Strategy for Lifelong Learning", which is part of the present government program, and it lays out general reform goals for all levels of education (formal, informal, non-formal). Similarly, a few additional policies such as the Children Act (Day Care), the Elementary School Act 2012 and the Exceptional Education Act of 1999, all elaborate on the significance of receiving an adequate level of education, regardless of the individual's mental abilities. Finally, the Cyprus International University offers a master's program, also known as the program of Education for Mental Disabilities and teaches students how to evaluate the skills of children/individuals with mental impairments in all developmental areas, support all stages of development with individualised programs, provide services for both the family and the children/individuals, and inform the community about the field.

3. FINDINGS FROM THE KEY INTERVIEWS

3.1. Interview participants/Sample

Initially, prior proceeding to the interviewing questions with all of the participants, they were all provided a copy of the document used for the interview via email, in which it included a

description about the project, the specific aetiology for conducting this survey, the estimated time of completing this interview, the consent form and were informed about the importance of confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, 7 individuals were interviewed by telephone and were all employed as kindergarten teachers. Specifically, all 7 interviewees were female and were working at a kindergarten institution, except from one which was currently utilising her maternity leave. Moreover, all the individuals completed the consent form and were in agreement with the listed requirements, except from recording the interviewing session. Subsequently, all the female participants were Cypriots and currently living in Cyprus.

All interviewees provided their name and age, except from 1 participant that did not share that information. Hence, the participants did not significantly vary in their ages, as the oldest participant was 34, the youngest 23 and the other four individuals reported the ages of; 24, 28, 33 and 25 years old. Furthermore, when the participants were asked to report their highest level of education, 7 out of 7 individuals responded that they have received a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, whilst 2 of the participants also earned a master's degree; one of the participants in Educational Technology and the other one in Special & Inclusive Education. Furthermore, all of the participants were kindergarten teachers, 2 of them at private kindergarten schools and 5 of them at public schools. One of the participants was also the director of her kindergarten institution. Proceeding to when they individuals were asked as to how many years of experience they have, these were the responses:

- 3 individuals reported that their experience is between 2-5 years.
- 2 individuals reported that their experience is between 6-10 years.
- 1 individual reported that their experience is less than 2 years.
- 1 individual reported they have expertise for over 15 years.

3.2. Key findings

All 7 individuals responded to all the questions that they were able to fulfil and provided insightful information, as to how the completed educational programs have prepared them for their career in ECEC settings.

- 1. Have you completed <an initial education or training programme> that papered you to work with young children?**
 - All of the 7 participants responded that they have completed a training program for working with children.

If yes, please elaborate more on the type of initial education or training programme you have completed.

- One participant stated she completed her bachelor's degree in early childhood education and her master's degree in Educational Technology.
- Two participants have received their degree from their university's department of Primary Education.
- Two participants have graduated with a degree in Early Childhood Education.
- One participant received her bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and proceeded to complete her master's degree in Special & Inclusive Education.
- One participant received her bachelor's degree in Pre-Primary Education.

If no, please elaborate more on the type of initial education or training programme you think it is/it was missing in order to prepare you to work with young children.

Despite the fact that all the participants did receive an adequate level of education for working with preschool children, a few of them provided additional responses as to what type of training was absent, to prepare them for this position:

- Two participants stated that educational programs should offer practical work.
- One of them explained that universities should include more diverse types of bachelor's programs for early childhood education, in addition to having the opportunity to attend educational seminars.
- One individual expressed that it would be ideal if universities would provide a program that would elaborate on any form of disability.

2. Have you completed any <continuous education or training programme> that prepared you to work with young children?

If yes, please elaborate more on the type of continuous education or training programme you have completed.

- One participant shared that they have participated in a seminar that was offered by the University of Cyprus, in relation to how dramatic play and play in general can affect children in preschool.
- One individual shared that they participated in a series of seminars provided by ANAD.
- Two participants followed a master's degree, in which one of them completed a master's in Educational Technology, whilst the other followed a Special and Inclusion Education degree.

If no, please elaborate more on the type of continuous education or training programme you think it is/it was missing in order to prepare you to work with young children.

- Three participants responded no to this question.

3. If you have answered yes on the first and/or the second question, can you elaborate more on the extent to which the following topics have been included your initial and/or continuous education and training:

- the overall philosophy and underlying values of inclusive early years education;
- the different forms of intellectual disabilities (such as autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder);
- the implication of the different forms of intellectual disabilities on the learning capacities of children;
- the approaches for ensuring children with intellectual disabilities can participate in ECEC.
- The plurality of the participants responded that during their time in the university they covered a related course at some point, but not with a specific emphasis on a disability. One participant shared that the university offered various courses for developmental disabilities and she managed to complete one.
- Two participants shared that the university did not provide any related course for developmental disabilities or for children with special needs.

4. Do you work/have you worked with children with intellectual disabilities (such as autism, Down's syndrome, fragile X syndrome, Williams syndrome, Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder)?

- When asked this question, only three of the individuals involved responded that they have worked with children that were diagnosed with an intellectual disability.
- Hence, the majority of the interviewees (4 individuals), reported that they have never collaborated with these children yet.

If yes, please briefly elaborate on your experience.

- Initially, one participant shared that she collaborated with a 4-year-old child that hadn't been diagnosed yet or hadn't received the correct diagnosis. She stated that following his symptomatology, including difficulty to speak and avoiding socialisation with his peers, the child could have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.
- Another participant shared that she had collaborated with two children with ASD. She added that one of them was a male that that tended to isolate and presented limited

perception of understanding, whilst the other child did depict perception of understanding, but also desired to be isolated and avoided eye-contact.

- Another individual shared that she collaborated with a male child that had an intellectual disability. She elaborated that the child required to be home-studied and reinforcement of his weaknesses in the cognitive and learning component.

5. Do you think that you have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities?

- All the participants expressed that they have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities, but did proceed to explain a few of their concerns.

If no, please briefly elaborate on the knowledge, skills and competence you think you need to help you feel better prepared to work with children with intellectual disabilities?

- One participant added that an educator must have patience, love, consciousness and knowledge about any type of disability to be able to work with these children.
- Two of the participants shared that practical experience and physical contact with these children could have helped.
- One participant shared that it would be ideal if they could obtain additional education on a variety of disabilities, in addition to learning various methods of how to approach these children.

6. Do you know any existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaboration between typically developing children and children with intellectual disabilities that foster a culture of inclusion?

- The plurality of the interviewees (6/7) responded that they do not know any methodologies for enhancing collaboration between typically-developed children and children with ID.
- One participant shared that she was familiar with such methods.

If yes, please elaborate more on how typically developing children can help their peers with intellectual disabilities feel safe and welcome at the setting, develop a sense of belonging and reach their full potential?

- One participant shared that the teacher has a vital role in helping typically-developed children integrate children with ID into their classroom. The teachers should act as role-models or archetypes in the “small communion” of a classroom, and implement methods similar to differentiated teaching.

- 7. Do you know any existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with parents (of both children with and without intellectual disabilities) in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?**

- All the participants responded “No”.

If yes, please elaborate more on how the parents can be involved in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities.

- Even though all the participants responded “No”, one individual elaborated that it is crucial for the parent to be fully informed about their child’s condition and accept the circumstances as they are.

- 8. Do you know any existing programs, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?**

- Similarly, when asked all the interviewees responded “No”.

If yes, please elaborate more on how different individuals and local organisations/institutions can be involved in creating/supporting inclusive approaches in ECEC settings.

- Not applicable.

- 9. Do you know any effective approaches and solutions that support ECEC staff in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities?**

- Unfortunately, all the participants were not familiar with any approaches that have been implemented in the country, with the aim to support ECEC staff in fostering inclusion of children with ID

If yes, please elaborate more on how to facilitate an open discussion among ECEC staff within the workplace about challenges and solutions in relation to working with children with intellectual disabilities.

- However, one individual shared that in order to initiate open discussions about similar topics, the staff of an organisation must be highly educated in such matters, in order to be able to exchange practices and evidently provide the most adequate level of teaching to both typically-developed children, but also to children with ID.

10. Additional Comments:

- All the interviewees responded “No” and shared that it was a pleasure to help.

4. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Essentially, following the completion of the desk research and the findings summarised by the seven interviews with the ECEC educators, it was evident that even though the country's universities and colleges provide a variety of degrees that specialise in Early Childhood Education, there is still some lack of education, specifically for children and intellectual disabilities. According to the responses provided by the interviewees, all of them shared that they are not aware of any approaches that support ECEC staff in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities, nor did they know any existing programs that aim to enhance the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members. Similarly, they added that it would be ideal for them to be able to participate in a few educational seminars that analyse in depth significant topics such as special education and empirical techniques for integrating SEN children into the classroom. Hence, a few potential policies for the improvement of ECEC educators' knowledge could be to:

- Strengthen the availability and training in educating students with special needs, by eliminating any pedagogical barriers between special needs education and mainstream education.
- Provision of educational seminars focusing on a variety of intellectual disabilities including ASD, Down Syndrome etc.
- Provision of educational courses that inform about evidence-based techniques a teacher can utilise to assist a child with ID in class.
- Implement parent-teacher conferences during ECEC to ensure that the teachers are updated with the child's needs and the parents are informed about the child's progress.