



EMBRACE

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

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents

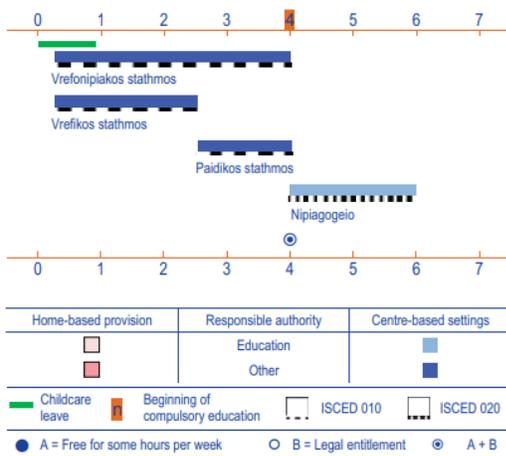
| | |
|--|----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 3 |
| 2. FINDINGS FROM THE DESK RESEARCH | 4 |
| 3. FINDINGS FROM THE KEY INTERVIEWS | 6 |
| 3.1. Interview participants/Sample | 6 |
| 3.2. Key findings | 8 |
| 4. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS | 12 |
| References | 13 |



1. INTRODUCTION

According to the 2019 Eurydice Report, children aged 0-5 in Greece represent approximately 5.5 % of the total population. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is provided in two phases: the first one is a “childcare-type” provision for children younger than 3 years, and the second one offers “pre-primary education” to children aged 3 and over (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019). As shown in the diagram below, ECEC for children under four years of age is provided by municipal infant care (vrefikoi stathmoi), infant/child care (vrefonipiakoi stathmoi) and child care centres (paidikoi stathmoi). Private preschool education and care settings, part-time childcare settings and integrated care infant/child care centres, also exist. These settings aim to provide care and safe accommodation to preschool children with no specific educational guidelines. As for children aged 4-5, education takes place in the context of public or private pre-primary schools (nipiagogeia) which have clear educational guidelines. These are not considered ECEC but instead part of compulsory primary education and regulated by the same legislation (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2021a).

Diagram 1. Early Childhood Education and Care in Greece.



Source: European Education and Culture Executive Agency (2019).

It should be noted at this point that Greece is among the European countries that extended the right to ECEC and introduced compulsory ECEC before starting primary education from one to two years. All children may be enrolled at child care and infant/child care centres, but priority is given to working parents' children, children from financially weak families, or in need of care by virtue of social causes (i.e., orphans, divorced parents, children born to parents with physical/mental disabilities, etc.). Yet, Greece has one of the lowest participation rates (81.5 %) in

ECEC for ages 4 and over, while rates for 3-year-olds are 16 percentage points lower than the previously mentioned (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019).

Concerning the ECEC staff-children's ratios, two childcare core practitioners and one assistant should be present in infant classes for a maximum number of 12 children per class. In child classes, one childcare core practitioner and one assistant should be present for a maximum number of 25 children per class (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2021b). As for preschool education, it is provided by pre-primary school teachers to a maximum number of 25 children per class. If the number of children exceeds 25, then either additional classes are created, or a lottery is conducted between all children to choose 25 students per class. The remaining children are distributed according to the school teachers' board decision based on age, gender and pupils' special educational needs (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022a).

2. FINDINGS FROM THE DESK RESEARCH

It is known that only one third of European education systems require that at least one member of the personnel caring for a group of children, regardless of age, is highly educated. Greece is among these countries that require at least a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) from early childhood educators, which means that core practitioners must be highly qualified across the entire ECEC. As for assistants who may be employed without an initial qualification in ECEC, those only work with younger children (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2019).

The prospective teachers of Early Childhood and Primary Education should be graduates of Higher Education, specifically of the Pedagogical Departments of Pre-primary and Primary Education. As for the staffing of public infant care, child care, and infant-child care centres, the state does not hire pre-primary school teachers. In public child and infant care centres of ECEC, teachers are graduates of the Early Childhood Education and Care Departments. Their initial training includes teaching-oriented courses, teaching in the classroom, and studying various teaching methods, and it comprises pedagogical training in addition to theoretical education. The Universities themselves compile the specific curricula, including compulsory, optional and compulsory-optional courses. Curricula mainly entail lessons related to each teaching subject, pedagogical courses and/or psychology courses. A combination of methods is used, such as theoretical teaching, practical exercises, workshops, etc., while teaching examples, enabling students to attend classes in actual classroom conditions, are also offered. As for the infant care centre nursery assistants, those must possess a minimum of a Vocational Upper Secondary Education certificate (ISCED 4) or a Post-secondary Education (IEK) graduate certificate, or an apprenticeship certificate with relevant expertise from the School of the Manpower Employment Organisation (OAED) (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022b).

currently implementing the Strategic Action Plan for the Equal Access of Students with Disabilities, which is an extension of the National Action Plan on the Rights of People with Disabilities in Education. An inclusion policy is promoted to integrate all vulnerable groups of students into the general education system. Also, the special education policy supports the inclusion of students with disabilities within mainstream schools by providing the necessary supporting structures and services. In specific, students with mild learning difficulties may attend ordinary mainstream school classroom, a mainstream school classroom with concurrent support-inclusive education by special education teachers when this is imperative based on their special educational needs, or integration classes operating in the general and vocational education schools (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022d).

When attendance of students with disabilities and special educational needs in schools of the mainstream educational system is difficult due to the type and degree of impediment, Special Education school units step in to provide education to these students. For preschool children, special pre-primary schools (nipiagogeia eidikis agogis kai ekpaideusis) and early intervention classes within the former target students up to 7 years old (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022e). The structures provided for Special Education are staffed by teachers who have received special training and qualification in Special Education or have related teaching experience (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022b).

3. FINDINGS FROM THE KEY INTERVIEWS

Before the interview procedure, researchers explained the concept of this research and that there were neither right nor wrong answers. A letter explaining the procedures and purposes of this research was distributed to each participant, respectively and all signed informed consent. They also encouraged the participants to answer at their own pace. Each interview took place at the respective schools for a one-to-one 45 min. session. As a consequence, the possibility of misunderstandings was eliminated. All interviews were transcribed and analysed. Descriptive data were accomplished in the present design.

3.1. Interview participants/Sample

Totally eleven ($N = 11$) ECEC staff participated in the key interviews. All participants were women aged 28 to 62 years (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Analysis of frequency per age

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| 28-35 | 2 | 18,2 |

| | | |
|-------|----|-------|
| 44-50 | 5 | 45,5 |
| 53-62 | 4 | 36,4 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

According to data analysis, three ($N = 3$) participants had a Master's degree, and an equal number had a PhD degree (27,3% each) (Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis of frequency per education

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Bachelor's or equivalent | 5 | 45,5 |
| Master's or equivalent | 3 | 27,3 |
| PhD. | 3 | 27,3 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Table 3 presents the working position of the participants working with young children aging from 3 to 7 years.

Table 3. Analysis of frequency per working position

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--------------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Educational Coordinator | 2 | 18,2 |
| Head of Kindergarten | 2 | 18,2 |
| Nursery Teacher | 1 | 9,1 |
| Primary private school teacher | 1 | 9,1 |
| Kindergarten teacher | 5 | 45,5 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Table 4 presents the ECEC staff's main tasks in their working position, with the majority (54,5%) teaching.

Table 4. Analysis of frequency per work main tasks

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Teaching | 6 | 54,5 |
| Teaching and management | 3 | 27,3 |
| Educational coordination | 2 | 18,2 |

| | | |
|-------|----|-------|
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |
|-------|----|-------|

Participants' working experience varied from 2 to over 15 years. Six (6) of ECEC staff participants had over 15 years of working experience (*Table 5*).

Table 5. Analysis of frequency per work experience

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| 2-5 years | 1 | 9,1 |
| 6-10 years | 1 | 9,1 |
| 11-15 years | 3 | 27,3 |
| Over 15 years | 6 | 54,5 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

The majority of the ECEC staff (54,5%) had followed continuous education in special education that prepared them for working with young children (*Table 6*). Equally (54,5%) had worked with children with intellectual disabilities (*Table 7*).

Table 6. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff continuous education/training programme for working with young children

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--|-----------|---------------|
| Special education-continuous education | 6 | 54,5 |
| Training Programmes | 4 | 36,4 |
| Nothing | 1 | 9,1 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Table 7. Analysis of frequency for ECEC work with children with intellectual disability

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| yes | 6 | 54,5 |
| no | 5 | 45,5 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

3.2. Key findings

Regarding ECEC staff's perceived sufficient knowledge on working with children with intellectual disabilities, 72,7% answered "no".

Table 8. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff perceptions on their sufficient knowledge

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| yes | 3 | 27,3 |
| no | 8 | 72,7 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Specifically, one participant said, *"We need seminars of longer duration and frequency so that we feel adequate in dealing with cases of children with intellectual disabilities"* (Kindergarten teacher with teaching duties, 53 years old, 6-10 years of service, BA degree). Five ECEC staff members (45,5%) replied that they do not know any existing programmes, practices, and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaboration of ECEC settings with community members in fostering the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities (Table 9).

Table 9. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with community members in fostering inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| yes | 6 | 54,5 |
| no | 5 | 45,5 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Specifically, one participant said, *"Promoting collaboration in the classroom, enhancing self-esteem, organisation of group activities and appropriate layout of the space and handling of materials"* (Kindergarten teacher, 46 years old, MA Pedagogical Teaching Methodology, experience 15 and over)

Accordingly, seven of the ECEC staff participants (63,6%) did not know of any existing programmes, practices and methodologies to enhance the collaboration of ECEC settings with parents (Table 10).

Table 10. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaborations of ECEC settings with parents

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| yes | 4 | 36,4 |
| no | 7 | 63,6 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Specifically, one participant said, *“Regular communication with parents in a context that makes them feel safe and accepted, organisation of actions that include them (e.g., workshops, educational excursions, etc.), participation in workshops”* (Kindergarten teacher, 46 years old, MA Pedagogical Teaching Methodology, experience 15 and over).

Five of the ECEC staff participants (45,5%) did not know any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming to enhance ECEC settings’ collaborations with community members (Table 11).

Table 11. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any existing programmes, practices and methodologies aiming at enhancing the collaboration with community members

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| yes | 6 | 54,5 |
| no | 5 | 45,5 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Totally seven $N = 7$) participants (63,6%) knew effective approaches and solutions that supported them in fostering the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities (Table 12).

Table 12. Analysis of frequency for ECEC staff knowledge on any effective approaches and solutions that support ECEC staff in fostering the inclusion of children with Intellectual Disabilities

| | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------------|
| yes | 7 | 63,6 |
| no | 4 | 36,4 |
| Total | 11 | 100,0 |

Regarding solutions for the support of the ECEC staff in fostering inclusion, one participant specifically said, *“Existence of support staff, training of ECEC staff and scientific guidance by the special education coordinators, a smaller number of students in each class, for special children’s cases have specialised support staff”* (Kindergarten teacher, 44 years old, MA Business Administration, 11-15 years of service). Another participant stated, *“There is no infrastructure and suitable staff at the station, as in Kindergartens”* (Nursery, teaching and administrative tasks, 56 years old, over 15 years of service, BA degree). All ECEC staff with a Bachelor’s degree thought they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities (Table 13). This is in line with 2/3 of the ECEC staff having a Master’s degree.

Table 13. Crosstabulation of ECEC staff education and perceived knowledge regarding ID

| Education | | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--------------------------|-------|-----------|---------------|
| Bachelor's or equivalent | no | 5 | 100,0 |
| | yes | 1 | 33,3 |
| | no | 2 | 66,7 |
| | Total | 3 | 100,0 |
| PhD. | yes | 2 | 66,7 |
| | no | 1 | 33,3 |
| | Total | 3 | 100,0 |

Interestingly, it was found that eight (8) out of total N = 11 participants thought they did not have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with children with intellectual disabilities (Table 14).

Table 14. Crosstabulation of ECEC staff experience and perceived knowledge regarding ID

| Experience | | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|------------|-------|-----------|---------------|
| 2-5 years | yes | 1 | 100,0 |
| | no | 1 | 100,0 |
| 6-10 years | yes | 1 | 33,3 |
| | no | 2 | 66,7 |
| | Total | 3 | 100,0 |

| | | | |
|---------------|-------|---|-------|
| Over 15 years | yes | 1 | 16,7 |
| | no | 5 | 83,3 |
| | Total | 6 | 100,0 |

In the last part of the key interview, ECEC staff participants had the opportunity to make additional comments that they would like to share. Some of them were the following:

“The inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in pre-school education is currently at the discretion of kindergarten teachers. The theoretical and pedagogical framework as an institutionalised educational practice and policy is almost non-existent”. (Kindergarten teacher with teaching and administrative work, 53 years old, over 15 years of service, BA degree).

“My experience so far without having encountered difficult cases of children has shown that the increase of cases requires a serious and definitely appropriate organisation to perform to the maximum, through our participation in seminars and workshops to train to be effective with our students”. (Kindergarten teacher with teaching work, 53 years old, 6-10 years of service, BA degree).

4. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To summarise, the findings of the present desk research indicate that ECEC in Greece takes place either as a childcare-type provision for children younger than 3 years or as pre-primary education for children aged 3 and over. Early childhood educators must be highly qualified, possessing at least a Bachelor’s degree, while infant care centre nursery assistants must have a minimum of a Vocational Upper Secondary Education certificate. Moreover, continuing professional development is mandatory for core practitioners for children over 3 years old, but not for those working with younger children.

The field research showed that most of the ECEC staff interviewed had received continuous education in special education that prepared them for working with young children. Yet, the vast majority considered their knowledge of working with children with intellectual disabilities insufficient. At the same time, most interviewees did not know any existing practices aiming either at enhancing the collaboration of ECEC settings with community members in fostering the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities or the collaborations of ECEC settings with parents.

Several necessary reforms have taken place in the education system of Greece during the last years, such as the extension of the right to ECEC and compulsory ECEC before starting primary education. Their aim has been to improve education quality and apply inclusive educational policies and practices for vulnerable students or students with disabilities. Yet, based on the present research findings, there is more that can be done to achieve these goals.

First of all, continuous professional development should be mandatory for all staff working in ECEC and professional development and upskilling should be a priority and be further strengthened with the provision of more incentives to engage in it.

Furthermore, more emphasis is required on issues of early educational intervention and on differentiated teaching for students with intellectual disabilities. Also, the promotion of integration education programmes should be actively pursued to ensure equal rights and opportunities for all students.

Moreover, the previously mentioned initiatives may require shifts in the allocation of resources, both material and human, such as the increase of support staff and assistants to provide specialised attention to each student. The evaluation of the existing educational and support services for students with intellectual disabilities would be very helpful towards this end in order to clarify the effectiveness of specific educational practices, programmes, and interventions.

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