

International Conference in Open and Distance Learning

Vol 11, No 4A (2022)



The Significance of Practicing School Leadership of Social Justice for the Distant Co-education of Students with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs in the Greek Schools, during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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doi: [10.12681/icodl.3324](https://doi.org/10.12681/icodl.3324)

**Η σημασία της εφαρμογής της Σχολικής Ηγεσίας Κοινωνικής Δικαιοσύνης στην
Εξ αποστάσεως Συν-εκπαίδευση των Μαθητών με Αναπηρία και Ειδικές
Εκπαιδευτικές Ανάγκες στα Ελληνικά Σχολεία την Περίοδο της Πανδημίας
COVID-19**

**The Significance of Practicing School Leadership of Social Justice for the Distant
Co-education of Students with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs in the
Greek Schools, during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Abstract

At the end of 2019, beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic appeared, bringing significant social changes and imbalances, due to the strict health measures proposed by the World Health Organization. The use of the protective mask, strict observance of hygiene rules and social exclusion (quarantine) were the most important measures imposed, worldwide. Being an integral part of the social system, as a living organism that interacts with society, school has, also, undergone significant changes in its operation. Distance education has been the main means of learning for all students. In recent years, inclusive education of children with special educational needs and disabilities has been an integral part of the educational system, so it must be adapted to the new social data. Greece is a country where distance education was implemented immediately after the pandemic, raising concerns about how to co-educate these children.

School leaders, who exercise social justice leadership, prioritize equal access to education for children belonging to marginalized groups. Therefore, in an age like today, plagued by a global pandemic that keeps schools closed, school leaders play an important role in the distance co-education of children with disabilities / special educational needs.

The purpose of this theoretical study is to demonstrate the significant role of the school leader of social justice in the implementation of co-educational practices for students with special educational needs / disabilities, proposing, at the same time, such practices.

Keywords: *school leadership of social justice, inclusion, distance education, students with special educational needs / disabilities.*

Περίληψη

Τέλη 2019, αρχές 2020, εμφανίστηκε η πανδημία COVID-19, η οποία έφερε σημαντικές κοινωνικές αλλαγές και ανισορροπίες, εξαιτίας των αυστηρών υγειονομικών μέτρων, που πάρθηκαν μέσω του Παγκοσμίου Οργανισμού Υγείας. Η

χρήση της προστατευτικής μάσκας, η αυστηρή τήρηση κανόνων υγιεινής και ο κοινωνικός αποκλεισμός (καραντίνα) ήταν τα πιο σημαντικά μέτρα που επιβλήθηκαν, παγκοσμίως. Το σχολείο, όντας αναπόσπαστο μέρος του κοινωνικού συστήματος, ως ζωντανός οργανισμός που αλληλεπιδρά με την κοινωνία, δέχτηκε, επίσης, σημαντικές αλλαγές στην λειτουργία του. Η εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση αποτέλεσε το κύριο μέσον μάθησης για όλους/ες τους μαθητές/τριες. Τα τελευταία χρόνια, η συμπεριληπτική εκπαίδευση των παιδιών με ειδικές εκπαιδευτικές ανάγκες και αναπηρία αποτελεί αναπόσπαστο κομμάτι του εκπαιδευτικού συστήματος και για τον λόγο αυτό έπρεπε να προσαρμοστεί στα νέα δεδομένα. Η Ελλάδα αποτελεί μια χώρα που η εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση εφαρμόστηκε άμεσα μετά την πανδημία, θέτοντας έναν προβληματισμό ως προς τον τρόπο συνεκπαίδευσης των παιδιών αυτών.

Οι σχολικοί ηγέτες που ασκούν σχολική ηγεσία κοινωνικής δικαιοσύνης θέτουν ως προτεραιότητά τους την ισότιμη πρόσβαση στην εκπαίδευση των παιδιών που ανήκουν σε περιθωριοποιημένες ομάδες. Ως εκ τούτου, σε μια εποχή όπως η σημερινή που μαστίζεται από μια παγκόσμια πανδημία η οποία κρατά τα σχολεία κλειστά, οι σχολικοί ηγέτες κοινωνικής δικαιοσύνης παίζουν σημαντικό ρόλο στην εξ αποστάσεως συνεκπαίδευση των παιδιών με αναπηρία / ειδικές εκπαιδευτικές ανάγκες.

Η θεωρητική αυτή μελέτη έχει ως αποστολή να αποδείξει τον σημαίνοντα ρόλο του σχολικού ηγέτη κοινωνικής δικαιοσύνης στην εφαρμογή πρακτικών συνεκπαίδευσης των μαθητών/τριών με αναπηρία / ειδικές εκπαιδευτικές ανάγκες, προτείνοντας, ταυτοχρόνως, τέτοιου είδους πρακτικές.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: *σχολική ηγεσία κοινωνικής δικαιοσύνης, συμπερίληψη, εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, μαθητές με ειδικές εκπαιδευτικές ανάγκες / αναπηρίες.*

Introduction

In modern times, inclusive education is the main topic of discussion in the educational policy of developing and developed countries (Papadopoulou, 2013). The ongoing social reorganization (flows of refugees and immigrants), as well as the existence of a significant number of children with special educational needs / disabilities make the establishment of integration programs a priority of national educational policies. According to Zigmond (2003), the incidence of students with disabilities can vary from country to country, because the diagnosis of disabilities is influenced by both the diagnostic tools and the language environment that exists in each country. He clarifies that the integration concerns all those efforts, which aim at the joint education of the students with and without special educational needs in the same school context.

However, an unexpected pandemic occurred in late 2019 in the Chinese city of Yuhuan, which spread rapidly worldwide, affecting Greece as well. According to the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), a number of measures must be taken in order to reduce the transmission of this virus, such as: hand hygiene and use of a protective mask and the avoidance of social conduct through home isolation (quarantine) (Rentzi, 2022).

Naturally, being part of the social system, school, as an open organization, was affected by this social change (Pashiardis, 2004). According to the new social measures, schools remained closed for quite long periods, while the courses were conducted through distance education. These educational changes have affected inclusive education, significantly, especially with regard to the students with special educational needs / disabilities. At this point, school principals, who exercise social

justice leadership, have played an important role. De Mathews and Mawhinney (2014) argue that school leaders of social justice try to look for ways to improve the educational outcomes of historically marginalized groups of students. After all, as shown by the bibliographic review, there is evidence of successful interventions in social inequality in schools, where the school leadership of social justice was exercised (Furman, 2012).

In this theoretical study, the inextricable link between the school leadership of social justice and the integration of students with special educational needs / disabilities will be presented, as well as the important role of the school leader of social justice in forming effective distance co-educational programs for these students.

School leadership of social justice and inclusion

As Theoharis and Causton (2014) point out, worldwide, the inclusion of students with disabilities provides them with opportunities to study and socialize with their peers in general education schools. The international scientific community has, consistently, pointed out that inequality, segregation, misdiagnosis of disabilities and poor educational performance of students with disabilities persist in public schools (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Harry & Klinger, 2006). As De Mathews and Mawhinney (2014) report, historical marginalization and discrimination of students with disabilities determine the inherent link between the principles of social justice and inclusion. School leaders of social justice work to bring about change in their schools, and their work helps maintain the inclusion of students with special educational needs / disabilities into general schools (Jansen, 2006; Jean-Marie, 2008).

Despite the wide range of definitions of social justice leadership, there is a clear consensus that this includes the recognition of unequal conditions for marginalized groups, creating actions aiming at eliminating inequalities (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2006, 2010; Furman, 2012). Dantley and Tillman (2006) argue that school leaders of social justice challenge policies and perpetuate social inequalities and marginalization, acting directly. Furman (2012) concludes that social justice leadership is an oriented action, which includes recognizing and undoing oppressive and unfair practices, as well as replacing them with fair and socially appropriate actions.

Another key component of social justice leadership is related to communication skills, empathy and the ability to build deep and long lasting human relationships. These characteristics describe social justice leaders who have the ability to connect with groups of people (Brooks, Jean - Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007) and to adopt cooperation, democratic dialogue and collective decision-making (Wasonga, 2009). De Mathews and Mawhinney (2014) state that only social justice leaders can create social networks, which concern the special, inclusive education of students with special educational needs / disabilities, knowing that each school unit has a different context.

For the purposes of this study, inclusion is based on the fact that all children with disabilities and special educational needs deserve access to the general education classroom and all the privileges that students without a disability or learning difficulty have. School principals, who separate students, cannot promote integration and do not reflect the values of social justice. School leaders of social justice are responsible for establishing a school culture that rejects segregation and unequal treatment, while their day-to-day work must reflect this responsibility.

Inclusive education in Greece for the students with disabilities and special educational needs

As Zoniou-Sideri (2000) points out, in Greece, school inclusion of children with special needs / disabilities begins to be discussed after the restoration of democracy in 1974. She clarifies that the 1974 Constitution and Article 16 state that children with disabilities are also entitled to free education at all levels in public schools. The preparation for the implementation of school inclusive actions started with Law No 1143/1981. However, this law categorized the students as “*normal and deviating from the normal*”, as a result of which, it received many criticisms (Zoniou - Sideri, 2000:78).

Law No 1566/1986 abolished the divisions between children with and without disabilities, while references were made about: a) the co-location of special and general schools, b) the institutionalization of the Special Class program, c) the training of teachers in matters of special education, d) the operation of support services with the recruitment by the Ministry of Education of special educational and support staff (psychologists, speech therapists, social workers, etc.) and e) the experimental implementation of full school integration (Alevriadou & Solomonidou, 2016). Polychronopoulou (1999) states that this law encourages the integration of people with disabilities in the general school, recognizing, however, this integration as a purpose of special and not general education, while the law does not specify how it can be applied in the educational system. Furthermore, in the Integration Departments of the general education schools, there were serious shortages in supportive structures and benefits, which led many students, even without serious disabilities, to special education schools (Lampropoulou, 1997; Lampropoulou & Panteliadou, 2011).

The year two thousand (2000) was crucial, because there was institutionalization of co-education programs in general education with Law No 2817/2000, which renamed the Special Classes into Integration Departments, establishing, in addition, new ones in the schools of general education all over Greece. In addition, this law introduced, for the first time, the educational institution of Parallel Support for students with special educational needs and disabilities.

However, much later, Law 3699/2008 is considered more complete, as it concerns the organization and goals of special education and training and refers to the inclusion of the students with special needs and disabilities into the social system, social life, receiving mutual acceptance in their harmonious coexistence in society (Alevriadou & Lang, 2011). For the first time, this law gives clear instructions, regarding the categorization of students into “students with disabilities and special educational needs”. Specifically, according to Article 3 of Law 3699/2008, “students with disabilities and special educational needs” are considered:

1. Those students who, for the whole or a certain period of their school life, show significant learning difficulties, due to sensory, mental and neuropsychiatric disorders, which, according to the interdisciplinary evaluation, affect their process of school adaptation and learning. Especially, those who are diagnosed with mental disabilities, sensory vision impairments, sensory hearing disabilities, physical disabilities, chronic incurable diseases, speech disorders, special learning difficulties, such as: dyslexia, dysgraphia, numeracy disorder, literacy disorder, attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity, diffuse developmental disorders (autism spectrum), mental disorders and multiple disabilities.

2. Students with complex emotional and social difficulties, delinquent behavior, due to abuse, parental neglect and abandonment or due to domestic violence, belong to the category of special educational needs.
3. Students with special educational needs are, also, students who have one or more mental abilities and talents developed to a degree that far exceeds the expectations for their age group.

For the first time, in this law, there is a reference to issues of training teachers in the field of special and inclusive education. In recent years, the Greek educational system has paid special attention to the implementation of inclusive education programs. In addition, Law 3699/2008, in article 6, clarifies the institutional provision of Parallel Support to students with special educational needs and disabilities by initiating that it is provided to students: a) who can attend the classroom curriculum with appropriate individual support, b) who have more serious diagnosed educational needs and disabilities and c) when there is no other special education framework (special education school, integration department) in their living area.

With the above institutional developments, changing the educational structure, the social welfare framework, also, changes, creating a model of equal opportunities and rights, eliminating the existing prejudice and delimiting diversity (Tzimas & Lampropoulou, 2007). These values are advocated by the school leadership of social justice, which is a key aspect in the access and effective inclusive education of children with special needs / disabilities in schools of general education (Theoharis & Causton, 2014).

Distance co-education of students with special educational needs and disabilities during COVID-19

As World Health Organization (2011) reports, people with disabilities have, generally, poorer health, lower education achievements, fewer economic opportunities and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities. This is largely due to the lack of available services to them and the many obstacles, they face, in their everyday lives (WHO, 2011).

Young people with disabilities are two and a half times more likely than their peers to have, never, attended school (UNESCO, 2021). What is important to be mentioned is that these students receive treatments (speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, etc) for a very long time, perhaps for the rest of their lives, in order to be able to meet the demands of their daily lives. The main goal of these young people is to be able to gain their autonomy and live, as adults, an independent life with dignity. As Mitchell (2020) reports, some special education students have gone months without occupational, physical, and speech therapy services and other supports, while in districts that provided virtual therapy, parents were pressed into duty, forced to try to replicate the therapy which trained specialists would provide in school, normally. As Seusan and Maradieque (2020) point out, efforts to contain the pandemic obliged schools to switch rapidly to distance learning methods, even though education systems, schools and teachers, not to mention parents and students, were largely unprepared. The same scholars point out that in a region where many students have, already, been falling short of achieving basic proficiency levels at both primary and secondary levels, before the pandemic, the impact of school interruptions on learning achievements risks has been severe and long lasting (Seusan & Maradieque (2020). Therefore, these negative effects increase on students with special educational needs and disabilities and that means that they need

additional support, if they are to access and continue learning, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Distance education involves teaching and learning strategies, which can be used to overcome spatial and temporal separation between educators and learners (Butcher, 2000 in Rentzi 2022). Distance education helps to co-educate children with disabilities and special educational needs. According to the International Institute for Educational Planning (2009), children who are excluded from the conventional education, because of disabilities and serious learning difficulties, geographical distance, insecurity and poverty may be able to participate through open and distance education (Rentzi, 2022).

However, despite the significant support in learning for children with disabilities and learning difficulties, which distance education can provide, specific practices are needed for its effectiveness. As Seusan and Maradiegue (2020) point out, children and adolescents with disabilities depend on materials that use accessible formats, as well as assistive devices, while their teachers, parents and caregivers need orientation and resources, in order to support their education from home. As Branstetter (2020) reports, not a lot is working well, because e-class meetings are not exactly conducive for students who need personalized attention and step-by-step individual support. In other words, the main challenge for educators is to find innovative ways to maintain the attention of these students and keep them engaged online.

In Greece, effects on the education of children with disabilities and special educational needs were, also, observed. It is noteworthy that, as mentioned in an article by Papakyriakou (2020), the temporary loss of school for many older children with learning, social and other difficulties may have been a relief, as it has reduced the stress associated with school; at least, that is evident in the first wave. Papakyriakou (2020) added that the loss of school for kindergarten students with neurodevelopmental disabilities was a major obstacle, as the school is a unique and vibrant socialization framework, critical for young children. With regard to the specific therapies, these were greatly affected, especially during the first wave of pandemic, although the live sessions were replaced, quickly, by alternative digital methods (via tele-services and / or sending digital material to parents). An internet search of teachers' announcements from their experiences during this period, verifies that in each class about 15% is completely out of the process, while this percentage is largely identified with children with special educational needs (Tsitsimpis, 2020). Let alone, that from the professional experience of the writer in counselling sessions with families of students with disabilities and special educational needs, there is a large number of them, declaring that they have not got the necessary equipment (cell phones, computers, tablets, etc), because of difficult economic conditions or they have no or very bad internet connection.

Despite the problems that may exist, open and distance learning has the potential to expand access to education, involving a great number of young learners all over a territory, in emergencies, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic condition (I.I.E.P., 2009 in Rentzi, 2022). The benefits, which students with disabilities and special educational needs can gain from distance education, are a lot. The most important of these are:

- The educational materials in an e-learning platform are available to the students at any time they want 24 hours a day (Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003).
- An advantage, especially for synchronous forms of learning, is the possibility of providing individualized learning to the students with disabilities and special educational needs, with the possibility to adapt their own learning rates,

something important for this group of learners, as they need, usually, longer time to absorb the learning material.

- The material that is used in e-learning programs can be enriched with audio and visual files (multimedia), which can facilitate the understanding of complex concepts, especially for students with special learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. As Bhatia (2011) points out, e-learning allows a more realistic display of concepts and topics included in the relevant curriculum.
- In addition, since realism can be incorporated into an e-learning curriculum, it is possible to increase the motivation of learners through the use of interactive activities (electronic game, virtual world) or sensory simulation tools (Ally & Prieto-Blázquez, 2014).
- In contrast to all forms of education, distance education provides the potential of supporting learning that best suits the special educational needs of each student (Dotterer, 2012).
- One of the most important advantages is the fact that young students with special educational needs and disabilities can benefit from the use of Information Communication Technologies, through distance education school programs, in order to obtain the necessary I.C.T. skills for a professional career, which will help them live independently in the future.

That is why, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (2020) took immediate actions, with regard to the implementation of distance education for students with special educational needs and disabilities, providing educators with the necessary information and tools. Most specifically, according to the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (2020), the students of the Special Education Units of Primary and Secondary Education need to participate with the appropriate adaptations in the distance learning. Indicatively, it is stated that the planning of distance learning activities for students with disabilities and special educational needs can utilize, where possible, a variety of educational techniques and ICT applications and Telecommunications such as (Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2020):

- Asynchronous tools that support communication at different times (i.e. e-mail, web, video lecturing, educational television, asynchronous e-learning platforms). Asynchronous communication can take place by sending educational material, i.e. worksheets or other interactive or non-educational material, which can be materialized without the help of parents.
- Synchronous tools that support communication and simultaneous interaction in real time. Such tools can be chat and modern e-learning platforms. Synchronous communication can take place with the aim of maintaining the relationships of members of the educational community or the implementation of lessons or experiential activities, where possible.

Since open and distance learning has the potential to dramatically expand access to education, involving a great number of young learners with special learning difficulties, the school leader of social justice can play an important role by advocating the principles of equal access to e-learning for all students.

The significant role of the school leader of social justice in the implementation of distance co-education practices for children with disabilities and special educational needs

According to Theoharis (2007), school leaders of social justice know that schools cannot be great, until students with disabilities and special educational needs enjoy

the same enriched experiences, both academically and socially, as their classmates, while in this case, school leaders of social justice can facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction, during periods of school closure (Rentzi, 2022). Dantley and Tillman (2010) emphasize that school leadership of social justice explores and examines the policies and procedures that schools form, perpetuating social inequalities and marginalization due to race, social class, disability and other characteristics. This means that in times of emergency, such as now when humanity is plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic, the school social justice leader will find ways for his school to adapt to these social conditions, prioritizing the inclusion of students with special educational needs / disabilities.

Having the above qualifications, school leaders of social justice can apply the following practices to help include students with special educational needs / disabilities.

- They should adopt a transformational leadership style by promoting a democratic school climate (Pashiardis, 2004 in Rentzi, 2022).
- They should promote cooperation between the teaching staff, so that the disagreements, if any, turn into constructive benefits for the school organization (Reppa, 2008).
- They should find resources to provide psychological support to the children with learning difficulties and disabilities and their families. For this reason, the National Organization of Public Health has established a phone line where all citizens can seize for help <https://eody.gov.gr/tilefoniki-grammi-psychokoinonikis-ypostirixis-10306-gia-ton-koronoio/>. Furthermore, instructions were prepared by the First Psychiatric Clinic of the Medical School of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and can be found in: <https://www.moh.gov.gr/articles/health/dieythynsh-dhmosias-ygieinhs/metadotika-kai-mh-metadotika-noshmata/c388-egkyklloi/6936-korwnois-covid-19-odhgies-psychologikhs-yposthriksis-twn-politwn> (Rentzi, 2022).
- With the collaboration of the local authorities and municipalities, school leaders should explore the living conditions of the students with special educational needs / disabilities, offering the appropriate support to them and their families. (Rentzi, 2022).
- They should encourage the teaching staff to participate in training programs, regarding special education and distance education.
- They should cooperate with the local authorities and relevant international institutions, such as UNICEF, etc for further support (Rentzi, 2022).
- It would be beneficial to get in touch with other schools with similar student environment and exchange experiences and ideas.
- In collaboration with the teaching staff, school leaders should detect and apply existing valuable distance-education material (Rentzi, 2022), which can be adapted to the special educational needs of the students with disabilities and learning difficulties. The Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (2020) has, already, proposed several tools for the distance learning of these students. The following are indicative:
 - Institution of Educational Policy <http://prosvasimo.iep.edu.gr/el/>
 - All the necessary changes in the school textbooks have been made so as to be accessible to the blind and amblyopic students: http://www.pi-schools.gr/special_education_new/html/gr/8emata/orasi/braille/gr_braille.htm, <https://publications.cti.gr/>.

- There are several tools of assistive technologies that are offered free of charge from the Unit of Accessibility for Students with Disability from the National Kapodistrian University of Athens: <https://access.uoa.gr/ATHENA/>
- There free of charge assisting tools for text reading: <https://texttospeech.io/> and composing from the National Kapodistrian University of Athens: <http://demosthenes.di.uoa.gr/en/information.shtml>
- Hellenic Radio Television through the Educational Television offers great usable material for the teachers and parents of children with disabilities and learning difficulties: <http://www.edutv.gr/index.php/eidiki-agogi>.

Conclusions

The school leaders of social justice create a culture of democracy and care for fellow human beings, in order to respond for the educational program to respond to the needs of students with learning difficulties / disabilities in the Greek General Education. In times of social crisis, such as today with the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders are able to make significant changes to their schools, creating the conditions for the active involvement of staff, students, parents and the local community (Brooks et.al., 2007). After all, according to Derman-Sparks and Philips (1997), the school leader, who defends social justice, should: a) believe that oppression undermines the quality of daily life and work, b) desire resistance to oppression and c) be willing to think and take risks. In addition, research data show that the overall attitude of the Greek educational community is considered positive, regarding the implementation of inclusive measures in general education for students with special educational needs / disabilities (Alevriadou & Lang, 2011). Now, especially since education has been affected by the pandemic situation and is practiced through distance learning, it is necessary for students with special educational needs / disabilities to adapt to this condition.

This study emphasizes the significant role that the school principal can play in this direction, suggesting ways to apply e-learning practices. Furthermore, it suggests the design of training programs on the topics of social justice leadership, school inclusion and distance education programs for students with special educational needs / disabilities.

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