# SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION: ANALIZING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES IN GREEK SECONDARY SCHOOLS

*Liderazgo escolar en transición: analizando el papel de los directores escolares en la implementación de políticas de educación inclusiva en las escuelas secundarias griegas*

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**Abstract**

The study analyzes the pivotal role of school directors in the transition towards inclusive education within Greek secondary schools. A shift propelled by EU directives regarding students' integration who experience special educational

needs (SEN). It outlines the intersection of the Greek educational policy with practice and address challenges and strategies for supporting an inclusive educational body, contributing to the discussion on educational leadership and policy implementation. Dealing with the gap between inclusive education policies and their implementation, this study will focus on how knowledge and views of school directors affect policy implementation. The study assesses the readiness of school leaders towards the integration of SEN students in mainstream classrooms and postulates the informed and proactive leadership which is cardinal to success. The sample was comprised of 420 school directors within the region of Attica and the region of Central Macedonia in Greece. A descriptive and correlational analysis was performed that aimed to examine the relationship between directors' knowledge of the inclusive education policies and their attitudes towards implementation of inclusion. The research has shown that there is a significant knowledge gap on the part of the directors regarding inclusive education, impacting on their attitudes with regard to its implementation and efficacy. It is observed that directors with better knowledge on the inclusivity policies display more positive attitudes with regard to its implementations, and knowledgeable leadership in this regard is valuable. The study highlights the necessity for further training and development of competencies of school directors for the promotion of inclusive education in Greece. Policy reforms, targeted professional development and further research are required to prepare school leaders for the transition of education in diverse and multicultural settings.

## Resumen

El estudio analiza el papel crucial de los directores escolares en la transición hacia la educación inclusiva en las escuelas secundarias griegas. Un cambio impulsado por directivas de la UE sobre la integración de estudiantes que experimentan necesidades educativas especiales (NEE). Describe la intersección de la política educativa griega con la práctica y aborda los desafíos y estrategias para apoyar un cuerpo educativo inclusivo, contribuyendo al debate sobre el liderazgo educativo y la implementación de políticas. Al tratar la brecha entre las políticas de educación inclusiva y su implementación, este estudio se centrará en cómo el conocimiento y las opiniones de los directores

escolares afectan la implementación de políticas. El estudio evalúa la disposición de los líderes escolares hacia la integración de estudiantes con NEE en aulas regulares y postula el liderazgo informado y proactivo como fundamental para el éxito. La muestra estuvo compuesta por 420 directores escolares en la región de Ática y la región de Macedonia Central en Grecia. Se realizó un análisis descriptivo y correlacional que tuvo como objetivo examinar la relación entre el conocimiento de los directores sobre las políticas de educación inclusiva y sus actitudes hacia la implementación de la inclusión. La investigación ha mostrado que existe una brecha significativa de conocimiento por parte de los directores en lo que respecta a la educación inclusiva, lo que impacta en sus actitudes con respecto a su implementación y eficacia. Se observa que los directores con mejor conocimiento de las políticas de inclusión muestran actitudes más positivas con respecto a su implementación, y un liderazgo informado en este sentido es valioso. El estudio resalta la necesidad de una mayor formación y desarrollo de competencias de los directores escolares para la promoción de la educación inclusiva en Grecia. Se requieren reformas políticas, desarrollo profesional dirigido y más investigación para preparar a los líderes escolares para la transición de la educación en entornos diversos y multiculturales.

## Resumo

O estudo analisa o papel crucial dos diretores escolares na transição para a educação inclusiva nas escolas secundárias gregas. Uma mudança impulsionada por diretivas da UE sobre a integração de estudantes com necessidades educacionais especiais (NEE). Ele descreve a interseção da política educacional grega com a prática e aborda os desafios e estratégias para apoiar um corpo educacional inclusivo, contribuindo para o debate sobre liderança educacional e implementação de políticas. Lidando com a lacuna entre as políticas de educação inclusiva e sua implementação, este estudo se concentrará em como o conhecimento e as opiniões dos diretores escolares afetam a implementação de políticas. O estudo avalia a disposição dos líderes escolares em relação à integração de alunos com NEE em salas de aula regulares e postula o liderança informada e proativa como fundamental para o sucesso. A amostra foi composta por 420 diretores escolares na região da

Ática e na região da Macedônia Central, na Grécia. Foi realizada uma análise descritiva e correlacional que teve como objetivo examinar a relação entre o conhecimento dos diretores sobre as políticas de educação inclusiva e suas atitudes em relação à implementação da inclusão. A pesquisa mostrou que há uma lacuna significativa de conhecimento por parte dos diretores em relação à educação inclusiva, o que impacta em suas atitudes em relação à sua implementação e eficácia. Observa-se que os diretores com melhor conhecimento das políticas de inclusão apresentam atitudes mais positivas em relação à sua implementação, e uma liderança informada nesse sentido é valiosa. O estudo destaca a necessidade de mais treinamento e desenvolvimento de competências dos diretores escolares para a promoção da educação inclusiva na Grécia. Reformas políticas, desenvolvimento profissional direcionado e mais pesquisas são necessários para preparar os líderes escolares para a transição da educação em ambientes diversos e multiculturais.

**Keywords:** Educational Inclusion, School Directors, Inclusive Policies, Attitudes towards Inclusion.

**Palabras Clave:** Inclusión Educativa, Directores Escolares, Políticas Inclusivas, Actitudes hacia la Inclusión.

**Palavras-chave:** Inclusão Educacional, Diretores Escolares, Políticas Inclusivas, Atitudes em relação à Inclusão.

**Introduction**

The development of inclusive education in Greek secondary education reflects a dramatic change from traditional viewpoints, such as mainstreaming and integration, to a further inclusionary and embracing stance. This transformation rests on the European Union policy that insists on the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) into the mainstream schools. Actually, the European Commission (2002), and Meijer (2003) confirm the strategy of the

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union to be one that reflects a commitment to institute an inclusive educational system that promotes diversity and does not discriminate.

Defining inclusive education, scholars such as Soúlis (2008) define inclusive education as an educational philosophy that focuses on creating a welcoming and friendly environment for all children, regardless of their differences. This trend was further strengthened by milestone works and global declarations like the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) and the contributions of Mitchell (1990) and Barton (1998), affirming that children with SEN have a right to an inclusive education with, and not apart from, other children in less restrictive environments.

This is important in the context of comparing the two concepts and differentiating 'integration' from 'inclusion', where in this realm, 'inclusion' represents the more balanced perspective. This has been emphasized by Zóniou-Sideri and Nteropoulou-Nterou (2012) in their study, which underlines the necessity of a school system that is flexible enough to truly accept all children.

Greek legislation has been the main vehicle of change through which law was developed to incorporate pupils with SEN into mainstream education settings. The foundation was first laid by Law 1143/1981, although it had been criticized for its medical model of disability (Tzouriádou, 1995). Subsequent laws, as Law 1566/1985 and Law 2817/2000, have been shifted to inclusion by the addition of support services and advocated for integration in general schools. Law 3699/2008 and Law 4074/2012 have further aligned Greek policy with international standards, emphasizing equal participation in society by people with disabilities (Stasinós, 2016).

The implementation of inclusive education in Greece, however, is faces challenges, including segregation under new terms and the theoretical embrace of inclusion without practical application. Recent initiatives try to overcome these obstacles, namely through teacher training, adaptation of the curriculum, and offering administrative support to all engaged in the process of inclusion (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs announcements; Law 3699/2008 adjustments).

In the light of the above, directors of Special Education Units in Greece need to be adequately equipped with a mix of the administrative, pedagogical, and inter-personal skills, together with having the proper knowledge of the various disabilities and special educational needs. These competencies enable directors to implement inclusive education policies effectively, fostering an environment that supports the learning and development of all students.

Equally, typical schools' directors with Integration Classes have a role to play with the success of these classes and should possess leadership qualities which encourage collaboration, creativity, and inclusion. Through the ability to lead with these qualities, the director is able to turn the school culture to that which will ensure that each student experiences inclusion that is required of him or her.

The Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counselling and Support Centres (KEDASY) in Greece and the special and general education schools are additional to the cases referring to the specialized support services provided by the country for ensuring that all learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs enjoy an equitable opportunity to education and fully realize their psycho-social development. Directors of such centers and schools are expected to be full of knowledge and leadership that could give direction to such a mission aiming at promoting an inclusive society emphasizing vocational guidance emphasizing holistic approach to education that respects all diversity and potential in their students.

In the context of growing classroom diversity with each passing year, efforts have been made at an international level to redefine schools using contemporary practices inclusive in nature (Bristol, 2015). However, the process of inclusion implies many more transformations not just within the support systems but also in the school culture (UNESCO, 2020). In many countries, these problems do arise during the procedure of implementation of the theoretical framework of inclusion. Lack of conditions for education adapted to the needs of an individual because of overcrowded classrooms, demanding schedules, and lack of time (Mieghem et al., 2020), debate about the benefits of inclusive education and a deficit in specialization and preparation in teaching

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(Michaíl, 2016), among other problems that have been noted, and each country tries to solve them.

Simultaneously, in Greece, inclusive education is not fully implemented even with a relatively friendly legislative framework (Law 3699/2008) (Fyssa et al., 2014). In the words of Pappas, Papoutsi, and Drigas (2018), Greece does not have proper curricula. Further, studies by Fyssa et al. (2014) find that in Greece, general education teachers regard learners with SEN as the business of the special education teacher in inclusive classes, hence there is very little collaboration, no discourse and no inclusive practices for all pupils. It increases the chances that children with disabilities do not take part in classroom activities and, in result, are isolated. Greece is unable to overcome these barriers to bring about inclusive education (Fyssa et al., 2014; Nteropoulou-Nterou and Slee, 2019).

The work of an inclusive character of schools has been based on developing a cooperative school culture in Greek schools (Fyssa et al., 2014). The literature review shows that implementing inclusive education has importance at both theoretical and practical levels, where respect for human rights and social justice is considered (Michaíl, 2016).

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All teachers in inclusive education have to be ready and with capability of teaching all students. Teachers need good working conditions with the support to adapt their teaching according to the student's needs (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive education epitomizes a great reform, and as such, the role of the school principal has been highlighted since it is perceived to be central in making inclusion work within contemporary schools (Eisenman et al., 2015). School leaders can promote a shared vision of inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

Dual roles of a principal are those of care through administrative aspects and enablement of the educational process and culture formation in the school, keeping in mind interests of all children without exception (Young et al., 2017). Principals who can understand the need for inculcating inclusion provide in a manner that teachers, parents, and students are nudged to move on the inclusive path (Adams, Olsen, and Ware, 2017). For that case, the school structures, practices, and attitudes change to respond individually to their

students' needs, at the same time promoting equality, acceptability of diversity, social justice (Osiname, 2017), and in collaboration with teachers. Therefore, principals' influence is indirect in their students, through the teachers or direct by interacting with children personally (Adams et al., 2017).

Indeed, it has been realized that educational leadership is directly linked with the enhancement of positive attitudes and perceptions towards students with special educational needs and their incorporation in the same school as all other children (Zóniou – Sidéri, 2012). In this aspect, attitudes and perceptions would seem to be related to a series of factors such as genetic characteristics (gender and age) and academic qualifications (level of training in special education, experience in special education settings). Other influencing factors include the tenure and experience of the principles, and personal contact with pupils who have special educational needs. Other influencing factors include their tenure as principles in different schools throughout the country (Hadjikakou & Mnasonos, 2011).

This study demonstrates that in conclusion, the lack of research on beliefs and attitudes of principals combined with their critical role in realizing inclusive education has led to designing this study. The study was designed to further investigate high school principal beliefs and attitudes toward implementing protocols of inclusion.

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## Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the perception and knowledge of secondary school unit directors regarding protocols and policies for inclusive education, and their relationship with attitudes toward inclusive education, in order to facilitate educational decision-making. More specifically, the objectives of this research are:

O1. To determine the knowledge and understanding that secondary school unit directors have about the protocols and policies of inclusive education that they should implement in their schools.

O2. To analyze the possible relationship between knowledge of protocols and policies for inclusive education and directors' attitudes and perceptions towards inclusive education.

Based on the specific objectives mentioned and considering the literature review, the following research questions are formulated:

What is the level of knowledge and understanding of principals about inclusive education protocols and policies in their high schools?
What is the relationship between knowledge of inclusive education protocols and policies and the attitudes, perceptions and roles of directors of special education units?

The research design used ex post facto descriptive and correlational research for phenomena not amenable to the manipulation of variables and therefore appropriate for understanding events as they naturally occur (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Bisquerra, 2009). This approach aims to gain observation and analysis of relationships between variables after the fact, insighting their natural interaction without establishing causality due to probability unknown variables affecting the outcomes (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

*Population and sample*

The research population included general, special, and vocational secondary education principals of Attica, and Central Macedonia of Greece and the Educational Support and Guidance Centres. Principals were selected using simple random sampling. Out of the 750 directors to whom the questionnaires were sent out, 420 responded, and the response rate was thus 56%. The final sample was a composition of 56.4% males and 43.6% females (see Figure 1).

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**Figure 1**
*Gender Distribution*
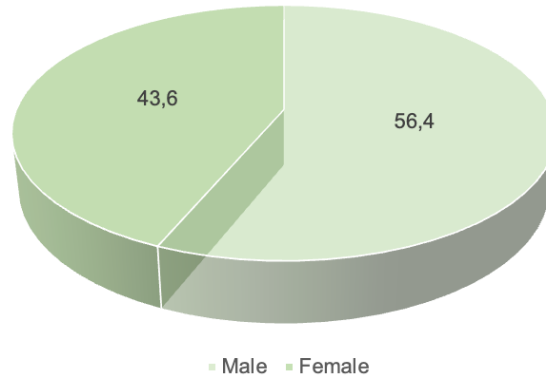


Regarding the age of the directors, the average years of age being 55.81 (SD = 4.094). Most of them (82.6%) had served over 21 years. Their experience as directors ranged from 1 to 5 years (33.1%) and 6 to 10 years (42.6%). Some 4.8% have Special Education studies, their qualifications ranging from seminars to master's degrees and specializations in the field, while 95.2% of directors do not have experience in teaching students with disabilities (see Figure 2).

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**Figure 2**
*Distribution based on experience in teaching students with disabilities*
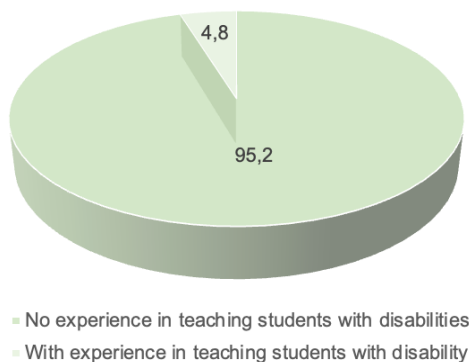
*Information Collection Instrument*

Data for this research was collected from a structured questionnaire that had four sections. The first section had nine questions based on demographic information from the center directors. The second part investigates the knowledge of the principals with respect to the legal framework of inclusion in Greece on the basis of a study that was conducted in 2004 by the Ministry of Education and the Hellenic Pedagogical Institute. It is a tool that consisted of 25 questions where "True," "False," "Don't know" have to be answered, measuring knowledge about inclusive education, concerning the fields of conceptual definitions, inclusive education models, international policies, Greek legislative measures, and school inclusion protocols. The third section of the questionnaire, with 15 close-ended Likert scale questions, was based on the study conducted by Blackie in the year 2010 and that of Shi in the year 2020 to further explore the views of the directors on special education and inclusion. Finally, the fourth section touches on the roles of directors in the implementation of inclusive education, underpinning the literature by Devecchi and Nevin (2010) and Carter and Abawl (2018). It comprises 15 closed 5-point Likert scale questions and an added question on the effective management of students with special educational needs. This section is aimed at laying down the skills and abilities that the directors feel need to be set for the effective promotion of inclusive education policies.

The pilot study furthered the refinement of the questionnaire for clarity and an assessment of its validity and reliability. Validity stands for the fact that the questionnaire measures the concepts meant to be measured in a correct way, while reliability means consistency across tests. Thus, content validity of the questionnaire and its applicability were verified (Nova-Kaltsouni, 2014).

The key steps to ensure that validity was being achieved included the development of a theoretical framework, the selection of data aligning with the aim of research, and thorough framing of questions (Cohen et al., 2008). The sampling criterion was through probability theory to lessen the bias, increasing the external validity, and data sources and literature review included triangulation for credibility (Vamvoúkas, 2010).

The used instrument in this research was a questionnaire designed to focus on the directors' knowledge in inclusive education, perceptions of special education, and roles in the implementation of the protocol, which covered conceptual definitions, inclusive education models, and the inclusion protocols in Greek schools.

Seventy-five directors were sampled in the pilot study and gave their full responses after clarifications. The sample constituted 58.7% males and 41.3% females where the mean age of the respondents was 55.19 (S.D.=4.983). In majority, were urban area directors (81.3%) with 76.0% had over 21 years of teaching experience. As for experience as a director, 34.7% had served 1 to 5 years, 37.3% had served 11 to 20 years, while a smaller portion had served over 21 years, most (92.0%) lacking experience with students with disabilities.
Validity and reliability were confirmed through Internal Consistency Analysis with Cronbach's Alpha and item discrimination analysis via Student's t-test, applied to Likert scale questions in sections three and four, assessing the homogeneity of the 30 questions.

The reliability analysis of the scale revealed a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.813, indicating a criterion of high reliability (Nunnally, 1994). When the test was applied to the various dimensions, values above 0.897 were obtained (see Table 1).

**Table 1**
*Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire and according to its dimensions and subdimensions*

| Subdimensions | Cronbach's alpha |
| --- | --- |
| Perception of the implementation of inclusive education protocols | .974 |
| Perception of the importance of inclusive education | .925 |
| Role of the director in factors that play a significant and important role in promoting and enhancing inclusive education | .897 |
| Role of the director in situations or issues that can hinder the promotion of inclusive education | .937 |

With respect to ethical considerations, the questionnaire was accompanied by an informed consent describing the topic of the research and its purpose. Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously and voluntarily, safeguarding personal information. The option to stop participating in the study

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was reported if they so estimated, ensuring that questionnaires and data would be kept as a general record for data analysis.

*Data analysis strategies*

During the research process, data analysis was carried out using the statistical software SPSS, version 28 for Mac. In the questionnaire construction process, internal consistency was estimated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and discrimination coefficient calculations. The final sample's data are then normalized by a series of tests: skewness coefficient, kurtosis, and the goodness of fit of the statistical model using the chi-square test.

To address the first of the specific objectives, the data was treated by classifying correct answers with 1 point, while incorrect answers, "I don't know," or unanswered questions were scored as 0 points. Consequently, the total score for knowledge about the implementation of inclusive education protocols was calculated cumulatively and converted into percentages for each domain, as well as for the overall knowledge scale (a higher score and, by extension, higher percentages indicate greater knowledge). After summing up the data, the general knowledge score ranged from 0 to 25. Individuals who scored from 0 to 8 were classified as having low knowledge, those scoring from 9 to 17 as having moderate knowledge, and those scoring from 18 to 25 as having a high knowledge of the legal framework related to inclusive and special education in Greece. This allowed for descriptive analysis (frequencies and percentages) of each element, by sub-dimensions.

Subsequently, variables were calculated which represented the sum of elements from the sub-dimensions of Directors' Attitudes and Perceptions of the Special Education School Unit. These included the following variables: Perceptions of the Implementation of Inclusive Education Protocols, Perceptions of the various aspects or components related to the development and implementation of inclusive education, Role of the Principal in Strengthening and Promoting Inclusive Education, and Needs, Problems, or Situations Addressed by School Management to Improve Inclusive Education. Thus, a descriptive analysis was carried out (measures of central tendency

(mean), and dispersion and variability (standard deviation) for each of the sub-dimensions that constitute them.

Finally, to achieve the second specific objective, a correlational study was conducted between the level of knowledge and the new variables representing directors' attitudes and perceptions towards inclusive education through ANOVA analysis. Furthermore, a correlation test was performed, through Pearson correlation coefficient, among the dimensions of Knowledge of Conceptual Clarification of Definitions, Knowledge of Models of Inclusive Education, Knowledge of International Policy of Inclusive Education, Knowledge of Legislation and Measures of Inclusion in the Greek Educational System, Knowledge of Protocols of Inclusion in Greek Schools, Perceptions of the Implementation of Inclusive Education Protocols, Perceptions of the various aspects or components related to the development and implementation of inclusive education, Role of the Principal in Strengthening and Promoting Inclusive Education, Role of the director in situations or issues that can hinder the promotion of inclusive education.

## Results

In response to the first of the questions raised about the level of knowledge and understanding of principals about inclusive education protocols and policies in their secondary schools, 71.0% of the directors have a low level of knowledge about inclusion protocols and policies in secondary education schools, while 14.5% have a moderate level of knowledge, and another 14.5% have a high level of knowledge.

**Table *2***
*Levels of knowledge about Educational inclusion protocols and policies in their secondary schools*

|  | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Low | 298 | 71.0 |
| Moderate | 61 | 14.5 |
| High | 61 | 14.5 |
| Total | 420 | 100.0 |

In general, there is a moderate level of perception among principals of the benefits and challenges of education in the context of inclusion in the school environment, as well as the role of principals in the implementation of inclusion protocols (see table 3).

**Table 3**
*Perceptions of School Directors Regarding the Concept of Inclusion for dimensions*

|  | N | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education protocols | 420 | 3.32 | .984 |
| Perceptions of underlying cause of inclusive education development | 420 | 3.60 | .591 |
| Role of the principal to strengthen and promote inclusive education | 420 | 3.47 | .803 |
| Role of the director in situations or issues that can hinder the promotion of inclusive education | 420 | 3.33 | .838 |

The study aimed to identify the connection between directors' knowledge and their attitudes towards inclusive education. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) results indicated significant differences in directors' attitudes based on their knowledge levels, with the Scheffé post hoc test further delineating these variations across groups (refer to Table 4). Key findings include:

Regarding the implementation of inclusive education protocols (F=536.422, p=0.000), directors with low knowledge levels placed more importance on the implementation of inclusive education protocols compared to those with moderate (I-J=1.044, p=0.000) and high knowledge levels (I-J=2.309, p=0.000). Moderately knowledgeable directors also valued this more than their highly knowledgeable counterparts (I-J=1.265, p=0.000).

When considering aspects of developing and implementing inclusive education (F=366.208, p=0.000), directors with moderate knowledge prioritized this more than those with low knowledge (I-J=0.371, p=0.000). Directors with high knowledge placed even greater importance on this compared to those with moderate (I-J=0.978, p=0.000) and low knowledge levels (I-J=1.349, p=0.000).
The role of the principal in promoting inclusive education (F=390.891, p=0.000) was seen as more significant by directors with high (I-J=1.780, p=0.000) and moderate knowledge (I-J=0.854, p=0.000) compared to those with low knowledge.

In addressing needs and problems to improve inclusive education (F=533.741, p=0.000), directors with high knowledge (I-J=1.946, p=0.000) and those with moderate knowledge (I-J=0.948, p=0.000) considered this more important than those with low knowledge.

These results highlight the positive correlation between the level of knowledge of inclusive education protocols and policies and the proactive attitudes and perceptions of directors regarding the implementation and promotion of inclusive education practices.

**Table 4**
*Comparison of means about the attitudes and perceptions of directors of special education school unit according to the variable Levels of knowledge*

|  | knowledge Levels | M | SD | N | F | p | Groups/ I-J (p) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education protocols | Low | 3.81 | 0.528 | 298 | 536.422 | .000 | Low-Mod/ 1.044 (.000) |
|  | Moderate | 2.76 | 0.487 | 61 |  |  | Low-High / 2.309 (.000) |
|  | High | 1.50 | 0.525 | 61 |  |  | Mod-High / 1.265 (.000) |
| Perceptions of the various aspects or components related to the development and implementation of inclusive education | Low | 3.35 | 0.345 | 298 | 366.208 | .000 | Mod-Low / 0.371 (.000) |
|  | Moderate | 3.72 | 0.392 | 61 |  |  | High-Low / 1.349 (.000) |
|  | High | 4.70 | 0.378 | 61 |  |  | High-Mod / 0.978 (.000) |
| Role of the principal to strengthen and promote inclusive education | Low | 3.09 | 0.495 | 298 | 390.891 | .000 | Mod-Low / 0.854 (.000) |
|  | Moderate | 3.94 | 0.515 | 61 |  |  | High-Low / 1.780 (.000) |
|  | High | 4.87 | 0.301 | 61 |  |  |  |
| Role of the director in situations or issues that can hinder the promotion of inclusive education | Low | 2.91 | 0.471 | 298 | 533.741 | .000 | Mod-Low / 0.948 (.000) |
|  | Moderate | 3.86 | 0.464 | 61 |  |  | High-Low / 1.946 (.000) |
|  | High | 4.85 | 0.252 | 61 |  |  |  |

The study, also, explored the relationship between directors' knowledge and their perceptions regarding inclusive education, employing Pearson's correlation (see table 5). The findings indicated significant correlations:

There's a negative correlation between "Perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education protocols" and knowledge on inclusive education policy and legislation. Higher knowledge in "International policy" (r=-.801, p<.001) and "Legislation and measures" (r=-.803, p<.001) correlates with lower perception

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scores. Similar negative correlations were found with "Conceptual clarification" (r=-.754, p<.001), "Models of inclusive education" (r=-.789, p<.001), and "Inclusion protocols" (r=-.639, p<.001), suggesting higher knowledge results in lower perceptions about the execution of inclusive education protocols in Greece.

Positive correlations were observed between the level of knowledge and perceptions on inclusive education development and implementation. Higher knowledge positively correlates with perceptions in "Conceptual clarification" (r=.741, p<.001), "Models" (r=.736, p<.001), "International policy" (r=.767, p<.001), "Legislation and measures" (r=.718, p<.001), and "Inclusion protocols" (r=.575, p<.001), indicating that increased knowledge enhances positive perceptions of inclusive education aspects.

The principal's role in promoting inclusive education also showed a positive and strong correlation with knowledge levels: "Conceptual clarification" (r=.734, p<.001), "Models" (r=.758, p<.001), "International policy" (r=.740, p<.001), "Legislation and measures" (r=.743, p<.001), and "Inclusion protocols" (r=.609, p<.001). This means greater knowledge is linked to a higher appreciation of the principal's role in inclusive education.

Lastly, there's a positive, strong correlation between the principal's role in addressing needs and knowledge: "Conceptual clarification" (r=.762, p<.001), "Models" (r=.790, p<.001), "International policy" (r=.783, p<.001), "Legislation and measures" (r=.776, p<.001), and "Inclusion protocols" (r=.637, p<.001), indicating that more knowledgeable directors value their role in managing school administration to enhance inclusive education more highly.

**Table 5**
*Correlation between subdimensions Knowledge of protocols and policies of inclusive education, the attitudes and perceptions of directors of special education school unit*

| | | Conceptual clarification of definitions | Models of inclusive education | International policy of inclusive education | Legislation and measures of inclusion | Protocols of inclusion in Greek schools |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceptions of the implementation of inclusive education protocols | r | -.754** | -.789** | -.801** | -.803** | -.639** |
| | p | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| Perceptions of the various | r | .741** | .736** | .767** | .718** | .575** |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| aspects or components related to the development and implementation of inclusive education | p | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| Role of the principal to strengthen and promote inclusive education | r | .734** | .758** | .740** | .743** | .609** |
| | p | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| Role of the director in situations or issues that can hinder the promotion of inclusive education | r | .762** | .790** | .783** | .776** | .637** |
| | p | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |

*Note.*** The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

## Conclusions and Discussion

The current research attempted to explore the perceptions of directors of secondary education in Greece regarding inclusive education protocols and policies taking into account all its variable components - knowledge, understanding and perceptions. The study also sought to establish the likely relationship between the knowledge possessed by the directors and their attitudes in respect of inclusive education.

Awareness and understanding by directors in respect to the protocols of inclusive education ranged from low to high. Some directors were well-informed and actively implemented these policies, while others had a very poor understanding of the policies in place, which affected the implementation of the policies as intended. That disparity upholds the importance of knowledge about leadership for the implementation of policies of inclusive education, as indicated by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2021) and underlined by works such as Fowler, Coleman et al. (2019), or McLeskey et al. (2017). These studies reflect the dire need for knowledge and comprehensive skills in implementation among educators and administrators to the betterment of exceptional students.

The research that Gray et al. (2018) are conducting further emphasizes the sensitivity and awareness by administrators at schools to organizational and pedagogical practices that promote social inclusion. This finding is further an agreement with the wide range of attitudes towards educational inclusion

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among principals, which are influenced by their personal beliefs and the specific circumstances in their schools. This reflects the complex landscape of implementing inclusive education, whereby not only systemic support but a change in attitudes and perceptions among the educators and administrators needs to happen, as was noted by Woodcock & Woolfson (2018) and Mngo & Mngo (2018).

Putting into comparison our goals and findings, it indicates that the study managed to fulfil its objective of coming up with an understanding on directors' knowledge and perceptions on inclusive education. However, the variance in comprehension among the directors themselves raises a very important area for future policy formulation and training programs.

The gap between policy and practice in inclusive education, accentuated by differences in awareness and commitment on the part of the directors, points to the requirement of comprehensive training, resources, and supportive culture at school level in order to make the realization of inclusive education effective. This resonates with the findings of Görel & Hellmich (2022), DeMatthews et al. (2021), and Mitchell & Sutherland (2020), all of which are in concurrence regarding the complicated needs and challenges to ensure successful inclusive education, hence the need for systemic support, resource allocation, and the development of enabling educational settings.

In summary, while Greece has taken a few steps forward in inclusive education, the chasm from policy to practice is huge and calls for efforts to be focused on training, resource support, and growing a culture supporting diversity and inclusion. Ultimately, the geographical and cultural limitation of the study to the Greek context, allow avenues to be built for future research to engage in the effect of cultural and systemic differences on the policies of inclusive education with the consequences on students in diverse and multicultural settings.

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