

Author : Smaragda Skordi

G.Gennimatas Hospital of Athens-Greece/ Liverpool John Moores University/ Panteion
University-Athens-Greece

Address: Avidou 93, Zografou, P.K. 15771, Athens, Atiki, Greece

smaria4545@yahoo.gr

An investigation of the effect of economic crisis (2008-2014) in the field of Special Education in Greece, through the perspective of Special Education teachers- a qualitative research

Abstract: The effect of economic crisis, during the last 7 years, is obvious in many fields of public life in Greece. One of these fields, is the sensitive area of Education. Austerity measures led to downgrading of public Education in Greece, and also the consequence on Special Education was enormous. The aim of this study was to investigate the influence of financial crisis on Special Education in Greece, through the perspective of teachers who work in Special Schools or other relevant civil services. Using qualitative methodology, specifically semistructured interviews, consequences on teachers', students' and parents' lives were examined, investigating the opinions, feelings, and experiences, mainly of teachers. Results indicated that many aspects of Special Education were affected in a negative way. The limited number of participants does not allow us to come to generalizations, however, useful information was gained from this study. Inclusive education seems to be a generalized request and also is the request for equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Another finding was relevant with the effects of financial crisis on society, generally. Future research could refer to solutions and proposals for remedial action.

Key words: Special, Education, economic, crisis, effect, teachers.

Introduction

The onset of economic crisis in 2008 has been a landmark for the commencement of significant transitions in Europe, mainly related to the financial situation of European countries; it resulted to social changes that affected population and almost every field of public life, especially in Southern European countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain. Austerity measures like the freeze and the reduction of wages, work intensification and other, mainly directed by Troika, changed employment and life conditions for millions of people (Bach & Stroleny, 2013; Bach & Pedersini, 2013; Grimshaw, Rubery and Marimo, 2012; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2012). Social dialogue has been disbanded, controlled or limited, leading to considerable costs related to the function of public sector and accordingly to the function of society as whole (Glassner & Keune, 2012).

According to the European Union Statistical Classification of Economic Activities (NACE, 2008), the main categories of public sector are Public Management, Defense and Compulsory Social Security, Education, and Human Health and Social Work. However, there are differences between countries regarding the structuring of the state and its separate functions. Yet, Education is one of the core domains affected by austerity measures in all countries where they were applied. (Bach & Stroleny, 2013).

Eurodice report describes in detail the current state of Education in European Countries, in relation to the economic crisis:

Although high quality education and teaching are necessary for Europe in order to make a quick release from the most severe monetary and economic crisis for the past 50 years, public capitals in all Member States are under excessive pressure.

Governments are looking for ways to decrease budget shortages and handle public debt without pulling to pieces the grounds of maintainable development.

Education finances have been influenced by crisis in many countries, especially in those with large public shortages. Twenty countries/regions reduced their education budgets in 2011 and 2012. Reductions of more than 5% were recorded in Italy, Greece, Latvia, Cyprus, Hungary, Portugal, Lithuania, Croatia, The United Kingdom (Wales), and Romania. Cuts between 1 and 5% were observed in Estonia, France, Ireland, Spain, Bulgaria, Belgium, Slovakia, The United Kingdom (Scotland), French Community of Belgium, and Czech Republic. However, nine countries augmented their education finances, including Luxemburg and Austria. In addition, education finances will continue to undergo cutbacks in some countries in the upcoming years.

Another important parameter associated with the economic crisis is the decrease of the number of teachers in European countries. The number of teachers diminished in one third of European countries for the duration of 2011 and 2012. The main reason reported is the reduction of the number of pupils/students but financial crisis also contributed to this decrease, since in several countries, including Greece, recruitments were diminished or even depositions took place.

Also noteworthy is the reduction and/or closure of educational institutions and schools in many European countries, as a result of the economic crisis. There were also cuts in the budgets for new technologies and for the maintenance of educational buildings, and reductions in teachers' salaries.

All the above affect in a negative way the quality of life of students and teachers and also the educational process dramatically. Such reports reflect the seriousness of

the situation related to education, in the years of financial crisis (Eurydice Report, 2013).

Concerning Greece, it is facing a unique austerity package forced as part of the rescue plan compiled by the Troika. OLME (Federation of Teachers of Secondary Education) delineates the disastrous aftermaths for education and the public in total. Economic austerity measures are a mixture of abrupt escalations in direct and indirect taxes, salary and pensions' reduction and social security diminutions. These cutbacks are well abolishing the welfare state. It is not the workforces, much less the educators that produced this public debt. Yet, it is they who have to withstand the load of austerity (EL news, 2011).

The economy has shortened about 20% since 2008- the worst downturn since World War II- and it is likely to shrivel more by about 25-30% over the upcoming years. Unemployment's rate is 24,8% and the whole number of people who are out of work surpasses one million, with youth unemployment at 52,8%. The government has took over to decrease the public shortage from 13,6% in 2009 to less than 3% in 2014 (ITUC, 2012; Papaioanou, 2012). (Although this research has been conducted before 2015, it would be helpful if we referred to the current percentage of unemployment in Greece which is 24,4% for the last trimester of 2015) (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2016).

Changes led by economic crisis and enforced as part of the prerequisites for Troika monetary funding, under the terms of the Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies (MEFP) and its following modifications, have essentially changed the negotiating configuration, disassembling the arrangement which had developed since 1990 (ILO Report, 2011).

Under the conditions of the Memoranda 1 and 2 with the Troika, an autonomous task force on education strategy was introduced in order to deliver a report every three months on measures taken to diminish expenses. The Ministry of Education will have to carry out the compositions of the program team. Thereby, the Greek government is enforced to induct a new idea of the “market-oriented school”, directed by the values of cost efficacy and economies of scale. These strategies lead to the undervaluing of open, public education to the investing strategies of profitable businesses. The reduction in public expenses will be 1,436 million or a 19, 2% decrease between 2009 and 2015. There will also be additional diminutions in the public investment package reserved for educational organizations (Kotsifakis, 2012).

There has also been a 60% diminution in the finance of school boards and parents are being invited to take part in funding. Numerous schools will not be able to buy heating oil in the winter, since prices have increased. 2000 schools in both primary and secondary education will be coalesced. Dialogue with the teaching specialists and local people is unfortunately absent. More closings and merges of educational structures will follow. Further education provision and special education amenities, counting libraries, sports schools, youth centers, special support schools, civic education, art, and ICT courses have been shut.

Although class sizes and schooling hours are increasing, the number of educators has dropped. Between 2010 and 2011 school years, there has been a 12% decrease in the teaching staff and there are now 16.000 less teachers. Many unemployed teachers are recruiting signing contracts with educational NGOs and their services are then “contracted” by the municipalities.

It is obvious that education is one of the most “compressed” fields of Greek Public domain, hit by financial crisis (ILO, 2012).

The criticality of the situation and its impact on Education, especially on Special Education, requires to conduct investigations aimed at reducing the negative impact on this specific field. Studies like this have the purpose to examine the consequences of economic crisis, according to the opinions of those directly involved, like the teachers of Special Education.

Such efforts aim to gather data in order to reduce damage and, in future time, to suggest remedial measures where needed.

Literature review

Educational History and reforms in Greece

Concerning the Educational System and Educational policy in Greece, it has always been a hot issue, since its foundation and especially in the period after the Second World War. Educational policy is ideologically characterized by the movement of “educational reformism” that focuses on the renewal and democratization of what was supposed to be an outdated and incomplete educational system, fighting bureaucracy, fiscal incompetence, social exclusion, and pedagogical dominance. The collapse of the military junta in 1974 gave an extra boost to the democratical renovation of the country and as a result, of the Educational System as well (EPASI, 2008). Many changes have been applied since then, aiming to improve Greek Education. Those reformations are unfortunately endangered from memorandum and austerity measures that threaten the function of public sector in Greece.

Regarding the educational reform that took place in Greece, its main aims were the service of techno-economical effectiveness and the achievement of social, political, and ideological efficiency. This reform was mostly applied during the years of regime change, called “Metapolitefsi” (1975 until present). Governments took a series of steps primarily targeting to change the structure of educational system. The years of Compulsory Education were increased, from 6, to 9 years. Vocational Training was included in the educational scheme and University education has been upgraded. Concerning the conservative party of New Democracy that governed for the first time for the period that starts after the fall of Military Junta and ends in 1981, its educational reform focused mostly on compulsory education, leaving few opportunities for “lower classes” to enter Universities. However, one of the most important improvements of this period has been the establishment of the use of Demotic (vernacular) Language in Schools and in public life (Bouzakis, 1995; Noutsos, 1986). On the other hand, the socio-democratic government of PASOK that ruled after 1981 concentrated mostly on post-secondary training and education, trying to remove barriers of access in Universities and also supporting vocational training.

The common characteristic of above regimes has been the ignorance of mechanisms that produce social inequality, which act through Educational System. Social stereotypes relative to sex or social status continued to exist for many years since educational reformers hadn't been involved in the battle against them (Sapouna,2004).

Nevertheless, major renovations (endangered from recent financial crisis) characterize the period of “Metopolitefsi” concerning General and Special Education.

From 1964 to 2002, 6 basic laws about education are set down, whereas for the time period from 1982-2002 11 additional educational renovations are recorded.

Several Presidential decrees, ministerial decisions and circulars are added in above overregulation (Vlahos & Daglis, 2008).

The introduction and use of New Technologies in Education has also been an essential renovation which characterizes the last decades (Firestorm, 2011).

Special Education

Special Education has also been in the center of renovations in Educational System in Greece, especially in recent years.

The history of Special Education in Greece is relatively recent. It began with the development of special schools and recently moved to the model of inclusion. The first law about Special Education was passed in 1981 (1143/1981). The law 1817/2000 follows, including 5 articles on Special Education. There is also the amendment 3194/2003. The last two laws followed the pedagogy-centered model. In this context also other educational services were developed, like the assessment procedures of special educational needs.

Above laws couldn't include or predict the necessary arrangements for special education, leaving gaps behind them.

On the contrary, the new law of 2008 was a comprehensive legislative effort that recorded, consolidated, updated and enriched the existing legal regime for Special Education into a single framework law which improved the understanding of basic principles of Special Education. One of its basic principles is the obligational character of special education, bringing it into the line with the provisions relating to the general education. Furthermore, it expresses the political will for significant inclusion of people with disabilities. It introduces the term "Special Education and Training", replacing the

term “Special Education”. The new term embraces all children, exercisable or not, trainable or not, without discrimination. Moreover, it introduces the international definition of disability as an extension of human existence, emphasizing in functionality, ability and participation and not in disability.

The law of 2008 redefines the purpose of Special Education that is to ensure equal opportunities for full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency of people with disabilities. Besides, it identifies the national policy for Special Education that is the co-training of all students in General School. It determines who the beneficiaries are for Special Education. Additionally, it introduces, for the first time, the official definition of students with special mental abilities and talents. Through the law of 2008, centers of assessment (KEDDI) were founded, the statute of early intervention was introduced, and many other changes in Special Education took place (Stilianidis, 2008).

The impact of Economic Crisis

All changes and reforms described above are unfortunately endangered from economic crisis and austerity measures. Federation of Teachers of Secondary Education (OLME) lists, in a letter send to European Parliament, the most important effects of memorandum policies on Education in Greece: There was a 33% decrease of public expenditures for education (2009-2013) and 47% predicted decrease until 2016.

Many schools have been closed and many educational support structures (school libraries, remedial teaching, Counseling stations and other) have been removed. More than 1.200 schools have been closed in 2011, including schools of primary and secondary education and 102 vocational schools have also been shut.

30.000 fewer teachers in secondary education means a 30% reduction of educators since June 2010. 10.000 deputy teachers were dismissed. A number of only 390 teachers replaced them this year. 3 major fields (health, arts, and aesthetics) of vocational schools were abolished, leading 10.000 students to stop attendance or change specialty. 5.000 teachers of primary education were moved to administrative positions. Annual salary of teachers reduced in a percentage of 22%-45%.

The number of students per class was increased to 30 students from the number of 25 that was the rule before, a fact that affects negatively the educational process. All above changes have an enormously damaging outcome to the educational procedure (OLME, 2013).

Regarding Special Education, problems were obvious years before the emergence of economic crisis.

With the entrance of Greece in European Union (1979) Greek state was obliged to: a) abandon discriminatory policies and the outdated social practices for people with special needs and b) to abolish old legislation and to introduce new democratic institutions which would install new structures and services. These services would allow people with special needs to regain their dignity by recognizing their political, social, and individual rights.

In March 1981, law n.1143/1981 was enacted in order to regulate issues relating to Special Education. Unfortunately, the authors of this legislation ignored the International Bill of Human Rights, completely. This law included discriminations and humiliating characterizations for people with special needs. The following law, n. 603/1982 was an attempt of correction followed by law n. 1566/1895 which introduced

Special Education in the Public free Educational System. The state finally took special measures for the protection of disability, youth, and indigents.

However, even though more laws were enacted relating to Special Education, (n. 2817/2000, n. 3194/2003) there were shortcomings in institutions and structures.

One of the weaknesses was the adherence to a peculiar and dangerous bureaucratic centralized model of power and control of the Special Education School Units. Any scientific, democratic, and social participation was prevented by the Ministry of Education. An extreme corruption existed, that threw the sensitive field of special education in a dark labyrinth without outlets for people with special educational and other very serious needs.

Another weakness has been the reference to a host of presidential decrees and ministerial decisions to set simple or complex matters which "wore" the structure, operation and establishment of SMEA, the KDAY, and appointments, transfers, postings of staff and selection strains of special education by involving service councils disputed constitutional and democratic legitimacy.

Last but not least, distinct roles and responsibilities of those involved in administrative and political centers that manage issues of special education have never been clarified.

Furthermore, financial crisis added additional problems for Special Education to the already existing adverse condition (ISE, 2005).

According to the National Federation of People with Disabilities (NFPD), 2013 has been the worst year ever for people with disabilities. Special Education is collapsing with unprecedented cuts, social discrimination and racial exclusion. Education has been marked, like all social and economic sectors, from the deep economic crisis facing

Greece, inevitably creating particular concern to people with disabilities. This concern is justified, if we consider that thousands of students with disabilities, even in robust economic times past, remained excluded from all levels of the education system. Some of the chronic deficiencies of the educational system in Greece, faced by disabled students are the following:

Lack of accessible school buildings , problems and shortcomings of the system of movement of students with disabilities , deficiencies in timetables and educational materials of Special Schools and Inclusion Departments of General Schools, delays in recruitment of teachers in special schools , failure to provide parallel support and inclusion to students with disabilities lack of specialized staff which hampers the provision of adequate educational services , and lack of educational books accessible to people with disabilities .

Data of the Ministry of Education reported that 89% of children with disabilities are excluded from the educational system and mainly children with severe intellectual disabilities, autism and multiple disabilities, although last Law n. 3699/85 and the previous Law n.1566/85, report for compulsory education for children with disabilities.

Yet, Special Education is a guaranteed constitutional right in Greece (Zoumboylidis, 2013)

Except of Federations of people with disabilities, teachers of Special Education also indicate the problematic situation and complain about it. As they explain, the already undermined Special Education today "is left to chance with the pretext of economic crisis." Proof of current desertion follows:

Institutions offering special education services are abandoned to their fate, because the subsidies are reduced dramatically. Care or accession design is not

provided for 185,000 children with disabilities, which are excluded from Special Education. Hundreds of employs in Foundations / Associations / Centers work unpaid for many months, experiencing financial problems. Many public institutions and special schools have been closed. By scaling dismissals or liability of the measure of labor reserve, the state tries to close even the oldest/ historic institutions. The collapse of services leads to storage of people and not training or education. The educational structures degenerate to warehouses of custody. Despite the low quality of care, the state demands extra money from families, in order institutes will be able to endure. Given the above, employees have no more tolerance, according to the National Federation of Employees in Special Education (PFOWIE, 2011).

Furthermore, in times of great economic crisis groups that receive the greatest pressure are the most vulnerable social groups. Social state does not give the same priority to all citizens. Those who are rich do not need social policy. On the other hand, people with disabilities cannot have a satisfactory quality of life without the support of social state. Simultaneously, we have to accept that a condition of progress is solidarity and cohesion. Special Education has to be a field of priority and not the “beggar” of the state.

Current economic crisis just revealed the preexisting problematic condition. In previous years, various measures in order to support people with disabilities where taken, but concrete steps in order to achieve them were absent. A characteristic example is that of the inclusion of students with special educational needs in General Education. Although their participation in General Schools has been legislated years ago, only a small percentage of them (10% of students of elementary schools and 1% of students in middle and high schools) attend mainstream education at the present moment. It is

obvious that the state merely institutionalizes integration policy, without taking the responsibility of implementing it.

However, reality is a social construction and we are all responsible for its creation, the state and the citizens of Greece, consequently responsible for the implementation of the law and interventions concerning Special Education (Tsoulas, 2013).

Given the urgency and the criticalness of the present condition concerning Special Education in Greece, induced by economic crisis and governmental wrong choices, the present study will try to shed light on aspects of the situation, will attempt to fill the existing research gap, and to determine the effect of financial crisis on the function of Special Education in Greece.

It is important that similar research efforts will be conducted in order to reduce the negative impact on education and give solutions for the improvement of the situation.

Research questions

Regarding the purpose of the present research, it is to examine the effects of financial crisis on the function of Special Education as perceived by teachers, and to identify its main areas that are affected by economic crisis. Another aim is to investigate whether this effect is positive or negative.

The above purposes are described through the following research questions:

- 1) What are the beliefs of teachers of Special Education about the impact of financial crisis on Special Education? These beliefs will be represented by the key aspects of Special Education affected, as perceived by teachers.

- 2) Is the impact of economic crisis on Special Education positive or negative according to the opinion of teachers?

The hypothesis of this study is that “the effect of financial crisis on Special Education is negative and that it affects many aspects of Special Education”. This hypothesis arises from the literature review and current data.

Methodology

This study was based on qualitative approach. The researcher who uses qualitative methods observes, takes interviews, takes notes, describes, and explains the phenomena as they are. He/she is always active because all the elements are used, even the way participants are sitting or talking (Eisner, 1991). There is a need for combination of data and conditions in a rational way, aiming to come to a conclusion, helped by observations. After the collection of data, the stage of interpretation follows. Relevant bibliography and co-workers give the necessary help. The investigator decides what is important or not, but his/her way of interpretation of facts, his opinion, and the final text are always subjective and depend on the person who conducts the study.

Participants and their narratives are described through qualitative methods. Results are affected by the culture-civilization of the researcher, who tries to explain data and come to a final conclusion.

What is important in qualitative studies is the judgment of the investigator and of the final readers of the study (Paraskevopouloy, 2008).

Given the specificity of the topic of this paper, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was supposed to be applied. This mixture of methods is called triangulation. It is a mode used by qualitative investigators. It helps them to check and

fortify validity in their studies by examining research question from various viewpoints. There are several types of triangulation. As regards data triangulation, it comprises from unlike sources of data in order to amplify the validity of the research. Investigator triangulation includes several different investigators participating in the analysis procedure. Theory triangulation consists of the use of multiple viewpoints in order to understand a single set of information. Environmental triangulation means the use of altered places, settings, and other important aspects connected to the situation in which the study was held, such as the time, day, or season. Last but not least, is the methodological triangulation which includes the application of various qualitative and/or quantitative methods (Guion et al., 2002; Patton, 2002).

A combination of methods was supposed to be applied in this research, however there were obstacles that prevented using quantitative data. Such an obstacle was the limited number of participants which could not serve further quantitative analysis. Quantitative methods and statistics could be used in order to define the key aspects of Special Education affected and to study whether the impact is positive or negative. Finally, qualitative methods as semi-structured interviews were used aiming to collect the opinions of teachers and to convert them to manageable and analyzable data. The latter brings the discussion on methods of data collection.

Data collection

Data collection is conducted through various methods and one of them is the interview. In the social research interview, the intention is for the examiner to provoke from the examinee or the respondent all types of information: interviewee's own actions or that of other people, attitudes, standards, opinions, and principles. The main forms of interview are the structured interview, the semi-structured interview and the

unstructured interview. Since this research followed qualitative approach, the most suitable method for data collection, according the opinion of the author, was semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interview is a term that covers a wide-ranging variety of cases. It usually means a setting in which the examiner has a series of questions that are in the general formula of an interview agenda but can diverge the order of questions. The questions are often slightly more general in their context of reference from that usually met in a structured interview schedule. Also the examinee usually has some freedom to question more topics, responding to what are seen as important answers.

A focused interview would also be helpful in the present study. This term refers to an interview using mainly open questions about a precise condition or incident that is related to them and of concern to the investigator (Bryman, 2004). For example, an interview centered in the question: “which do you think are the key aspects of special education affected from economic crisis?” and/or “Which do you think is the impact on every aspect?” and other open or general questions which will determine the main factors described by this study, will serve the purpose of this paper.

Additionally, interview is one of the basic instruments of qualitative method. It is the interaction and communication between people, which is guided by the investigator aiming to extract information, relevant to the objective of the research (Cohen & Manion, 1992). In other words, it is a technique aiming to create a “mental content”, to reveal facets of personality, and to recognize behaviors. It’s basic instrument is a conversation which takes place between two or more people. (Mialaret, 1997). Tuckman (1972) defined interviews as the ability to “enter” in the mind of participants (subjects). Interviews project the knowledge, the values, and the perceptions of the participants.

Data analysis

Regarding the technique that has been employed in order to analyze data, thematic analysis has been selected among the available methods. This technique is used for a broad spectrum of data and evidence analysis such as letters, diaries, speech texts, notes, and elements that occur from a research procedure like the present. It is a coded common reason, a refinement of methods that could be used from common people in order to describe aspects of the surrounding world. "Thematic analysis is defined as a research method aiming to subjective interpretation of a text's content, through the systematic procedure of determining, classifying and coding topics or patterns of the phenomenon that is being investigated" (Ballas & Gelinós, 2011). Thematic analysis is considered as a one of the most appropriate methods of qualitative research. The first step is the formulation of the research questions. The second step is sampling, a procedure that will be described in detail for the present study. The definition of recording unit follows. This unit is usually a word. The simplest version includes the handling of all the entrances of a specific word, counting, and comparing them. Next step is the construction of categories for analysis. We can count various categories (Holsti, 1969) and some of them are: object, direction, values (which are the revealed values), aims (revealed goals or intentions), methods, characteristics (which characteristics are used in order to describe people), perpetrators of acts, power, locality, conflict etc. Generalized and mutually blocked categories are preferred. A functional definition of categories should be given, in order to make clear what are the indexed we look for. "Classification of categories is the most crucial aspect of thematic analysis" (Robson, 2010). Examination of categories on text samples follows and also the evaluation of reliability. Deep interpretation of qualitative data is next (Robson,

2010). Thematic content analysis is a widespread method of qualitative analysis, a fact that will raise its application in future years (Ballas & Gelinos, 2011).

Interview guide

Regarding the stage of the research design, an essential element is the planning of a functional interview guide. This guide includes a sequence of subject parts which have to be covered during the interview. In case of the present study, a semi-structured interview was selected to be applied, because we wanted the study to show off the important and crucial issues of Special Education in Greece. These issues are relatively recent, consequently we prefer concerns to emerge from the research material and not to be directed from the investigator (Iosifidis, 2003).

Interview guide for teachers who work in Special Education (investigating their perspective about the impact of economic crisis on Special Education)

General aim of the study: The investigation of the economic crisis through the opinion of the teachers who work in Special Education.

Demographic and job characteristics

Gender:

Age:

Family status:

Workplace (public or private school):

Years of experience in the field of Special Education:

Choose the field were you work:

-Primary Education

-Secondary Education

-Other

Choose the Type of School

-General School

-Special School

-Other

Residence (choose on to the following): Town

Village

Large village

Education: University (Pedagogics)

Other

Basic research questions:

- 1) In what way, according to your opinion, economic crisis (since 2008) influenced Special Education? (fields that were most affected)
- 2) Was that influence a positive or a negative one?
- 3) Was there any consequence on your personal wellbeing as a professional of Special Education?
- 4) In your opinion, are the needs of the children being met?
- 5) Are there more recourses or fewer?
- 6) Are there more teachers or fewer?
- 7) Which were the consequences on your students' and their parents' lives?
- 8) Which were the consequences on the society as a whole?

Above questions aim to enhance communication and conversation and give the opportunity to the participant to freely express his/her views.

The main reason for adding demographic and job characteristics is that they strongly influence the view of the participants and consequently the results of the study. Tsui & O'Reilly (1989) state that demographic features of persons like gender, age, race, and education, have long been thought significant variables in psychological inquiries (Zedeck & Cascio, 1984). Regularly demographic variables are significantly related with specific views, attitudes or work results (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989).

Although we are not conducting a quantitative study, these characteristics may give us valuable information about the individuals who participate in this study and for the possible reasons and explanations that formed their opinion. The same applies for job characteristics. However, the latter may have a greater influence on the responds since they are strongly related to the research questions.

The sample

The frame of sample consists of teachers who work in Special Schools, General Schools, and other structures of Special Education in Greece. Since it was impossible to study all the population, expediency sampling was chosen. The aim of the present research is not generalization of the results but better understanding of the issues that are studied. The sample was chosen inventively and not by chance. It was considered that the participants had all the characteristics, knowledge, and ability to give full and in depth answers regarding research questions. It is a subjective method (Marshall 1996; Thompson, 1999; Ballas & Gelinos, 2011). It has been a difficult effort since the researcher does not work in the field of education. However, she tried to do her best in order to gather as many data as possible. Given the above circumstances, there were surely many limitations of the present research. The sample was not representative, so that future generalization will be inhibited. There were many teachers that refused to participate or others that found it difficult to understand the purpose of the present study. Participants were found in conferences, forums, professional and trade union gatherings because it was an easier way for the researcher to approach them. This means that they are characterized by specific qualities and features. They are usually the ones that care and are directly involved in the procedures of solving professional problems. But others who are less interested may have been excluded due to this fact. These problems will be discussed in detail in the “Limitations” section.

Ten teachers of Special Education who were considered to fulfil the prerequisites of the study and they also wanted to participate, were interviewed. Some of them had permanent job, paid by Ministry of Education whilst others worked with temporary contracts, a fact that affects their opinion and consequently the answers in research questions. Another characteristic that influenced the content of the answers was the workplace, since some of the teachers work in general schools supporting

students with Special Educational Needs whilst others work in Special Schools. The age of the participants also played an important role since younger teachers are more insecure regarding their work comparing to their elder colleagues.

Apart from teachers, the opinion of other people involved in Special Education's practice, like parents, is valuable. That is the reason why parents and also people who represent disability organizations and unions were interviewed in order to have a better understanding of the research topic. Comparing views is helpful when we want to come to lucid conclusions. Moreover, parents and students can suggest solutions since they personally bear the consequences of the current situation. 2 parents and 3 representatives of disability unions were interviewed in order to have a full representation of the studied issue. Representatives of disability unions know better than others the needs of people with Special Educational Needs and show interest in solving relative problems.

Interview procedure

Participants were approached and informed about the purpose and the content of the research during gatherings of unions, conferences and other similar assemblies. As soon as after informing they were asked if they wanted to participate in an interview and a promise was given regarding anonymity. Most of them had negative attitude towards recording, consequently their answers were written by the researcher who took notes, a fact that impeded communication and research process. Writing and listening at the same time restrains eye contact and other elements of communication and it also prevents the researcher from having a full picture of the participant, including signs of non-verbal communication. Informed consent of all the participants was purchased and a quiet place was usually selected in order to conduct the interview. In

some cases the interview was held in the same day while in other cases time and place were arranged and interview took place another day.

Content analysis

Conventional content analysis was employed because it is the type of analysis used in researches targeting at describing a phenomenon. In case of limited theory or bibliography it is the best type that can be used. The application of prerequisite categories is avoided. Categories and codes come from the content of the text (Kondarcki & Wellman 2002; Ballas & Gelinis, 2011). This particular type of analysis leads to deeper understanding of a phenomenon. The steps that are followed are: unprocessed text-----→ coding of text----→ comparing of codes in order to track down similarities and differences---→ creation of thematic unities using the codes----→ linking of thematic unities with bibliography (Ballas & Gelinis, 2011).

Data came from the notes which were taken during the interviews.

Topics which occurred were the following:

- Abolition of educational structures.
- Limited number of teachers working in special education.
- The needs of children are not being met.
- Parents are not supported properly.
- Inclusion.
- General issues of disability.
- Social exclusion of people with Special Educational Needs.
- Greek society during financial crisis.

Data for every topic were gathered in separate texts. New texts were defined as units of analysis. Every unit was separated in notional units that were coded. A title was given in every notional unit.

Example follows:

Topics	Notional units
Abolition of educational structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children have to go to another school, which brings problems of transportation, adaptation of the child to a new environment, impeded educational process or even dropping out of school.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers often have to change workplace and adapt to a new one.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers often have to work in more than one schools, sharing the hours between classrooms.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unemployment
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administrative and organizational difficulties
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited educational substructures
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Downgrading of educational substructures.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closing structures of Special Education prevents many children from education since their condition does not permit them to go to general school.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Issues of inclusion
<p>Suspensions of personnel and limited number of teachers working in Special Education, unpaid teachers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teaching and consequently learning is impossible in many cases.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One teacher is responsible for many students, so teaching is difficult and only guarding is provided for children.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many teachers are unemployed and straggle for survival.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many teachers have lost their job
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parallel support of students with Special Educational Needs in general schools is impossible due to the limited number of teachers.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Psychological and other health problems of teachers due to their unemployment.

	- Insecurity of teachers concerning their work.
	- Inability to teach due to psychological condition.
	- Financial insecurity, poor living conditions for many teachers.

The rest topics follow (for reasons of space they are not described fully here but they will be discussed in the “Discussion” chapter)

Limitations

It is obvious that this study had many limitations. First of all, regarding the sample, the way of collection was not representative, given that it is complicated to apply such a type of assortment. Consequently, future generalizations will be inhibited. Furthermore, factors such as age, years of work experience, the place of school etc. intervened in the results. This is due to the aims of the research.

In addition, another problem appeared, that of collection of data and searching of participants. It was difficult for the researcher to go to schools and find participants, so she approached them during union gatherings, conferences or other assemblies. But, people who are interested in syndicalist and educational issues may give different answers than others who prefer not to participate. However, many of them refused to participate in the present research, for different reasons. Others did not find it useful to conduct such kind of researches. Others were afraid of losing their jobs, since they did not have a permanent job contract, whilst others found it difficult to be interviewed,

since it was their first time and they did not have such experience. Greater participation was expected but it was prevented due to the above reasons.

Concerning quality issues, the limited number of similar studies in Greece, for now, obstructs the test out of results and their comparison with similar data. Furthermore, issues of procedure weakened the quality of the research. Such an issue was the way the researcher took notes instead of recording the interviews. Valuable information was lost, especially that referring to the reactions of the participants and to the non-verbal signs of communication.

Another issue worth mentioning is that many of the problems described in the answers are permanent problems of Greek Educational System. Consequently, this fact could confuse the researcher who seeks for the impact of financial crisis on Special Education and not for past deficiencies or shortages of Greek Educational System. However, crisis has exacerbated the conditions and it was difficult for the participants to distinguish between current and past difficulties. Most of them found a chance to express their opinion and to communicate their requests.

Other samples or other research methods may reveal different aspects of Special Education affected by economic crisis. While the subject of the present study is active and circumstances change from one day to another, different results than expected may appear in the end of the procedure.

Ethical issues

Given the sensitivity of the data which were collected, anonymity is an issue of priority in this research. Every participant has the right in anonymity but, especially in this study, participants are public servants and the expression of their opinion may have

a negative impact on their work or they may be afraid that it will have. Thus, anonymity has to be guaranteed.

Furthermore, an informed consent of the participants is essential, since they have the right to give their permission or not to participate in this study. We do not have the right to fool them or to distract their views by force or cunning ways.

In addition, we have to be very careful in order to avoid to sway their opinion. This can be guaranteed through the careful preparation of the interviews and questionnaires and the extraction of questions that influence the view of the participant. However, it was difficult to avoid terms like “financial crisis” or “negative effect”, “positive effect” that served the purpose of the present research. But, in the end, participants could give their own view on the problems and choose what to answer.

Finally, it was decided not to include the whole text of the interviews in this paper, protecting participants’ answers from being public and preventing anonymity.

Discussion of the results

Apart from the topics that have occurred from the interviews there are also some issues worth mentioning such as the limited number of participants and the reasons that make people avoid being interviewed. It seems that current economic condition in Greece rises insecurity of employees in general, and specific teachers, speaking for the present research. People are afraid of expressing their opinion because they are scared of losing their job. Their manager or their boss could be aware of their views and dismiss them. Furthermore, Greeks are not used to being interviewed, until recently. It

feels like interrogation for many of them and they avoid it “like the devil”. Some of them just turned their back on the interviewer.

The attitude of people who participated has also an important role to play. They seemed cautious at first and showed reservation until they finally accepted the invitation. The fact that the researcher was not a teacher made them guarded. They preferred to express their views to a colleague.

Another “hot” issue is that of feelings and emotions expressed during interviews, through words or non-verbal signs. Faces seemed worried, smiles were rare and anger was diffused in the surrounding atmosphere. Their words verified the speculations: distress, depression, anxiety and anger were common emotions between the participants. It seems that the topic of the research guided their emotions, since it was about financial crisis, a “negative” and “depressive” subject. However, it is obvious that their psychological well- being is influenced from crisis such as the quality of their life as a whole.

Regarding the topics that have emerged, the most relevant to crisis was that of the “dismissal and the limited number of teachers”, a hot issue when this research started. Many changes have occurred since then. A new Government was elected and it is supposed to “correct” injustice re-employing dismissed teachers and other public employees who lost their jobs during the crisis’ years. However, interviews were conducted before this elections and we will stay in touch with the texts of the interviews that reflect the beliefs and feelings of the participants. Most of the participants describe in “black” colors the dismissals of teachers and their impact on special education. Especially young teachers experience greater fear and insecurity. The limited number of personnel is emphasized and also its influence on the educational process. Children

with special educational needs require more teachers to support them. But, unfortunately, the number of teachers is falling while the quality of special education is also deteriorating. Parallel support and inclusion of students with special educational needs are disallowed because of the restricted number of teachers. Moreover, psychological well-being and survival of unemployed teachers is threatened due to work conditions.

The next –relevant to financial crisis- topic is the abolition of educational structures. It is an issue that equally concerns parents and teachers. Downgrading of educational substructures, dropout of students and adaptation to new environment are the subjects that are often described in this section. Unemployment of teachers and insecurity are also mentioned. Problems of transportation play an important role, especially for those have to change workplace or attend a remote school. Some answers are individualized and participants describe the situation from their point of view, giving emphasis to personal problems that reflect the concurrent condition. Parents of children focused on their child's and family's needs while teachers gave a more general description.

Another topic refers to the needs of children. We have to admit that some of the problems which are described here existed before financial crisis, however, they worsened due to the crisis. Lack of educational materials, limited number of teachers, dysfunction of inclusion classes and shortenings in mental health personnel are emphasized. Disability benefits, diagnosis procedures and unmet fundamental needs of children are essential issues here. Children are at the center of Special Education and exceptional attention must be paid to them.

Inclusive education has been established by international organizations like UNESCO and was promoted through guidelines of European Union, however it is difficult to be achieved through hard time of financial crisis. Parents, teachers, and also people with disabilities support inclusion but some of them are cautious and are afraid of that it will be used as an excuse in order Special Schools will be closed.

Parents need financial and psychological support, and that is another topic of the research. Children usually need extra help from other professionals such as doctors and various therapists and parents have to bear all these extra costs. Although parents of “disabled” children usually show enormous psychological strength, it is obvious that services applied for them must also be established.

Disability in general was expected to occur as a theme, since children with special educational needs are also included in the category of the “disabled” people. The main issues emerged here were the shortage of structures, the equality of opportunities and the classification of (disability based) medical model. It seems that international guidelines are difficult to apply in Greece where lack of planning and shortage of proper administration are evident. People with special educational needs and parents are more “sensitive” in issues of disability.

Social exclusion and discriminations for people with Special Educational Needs are still present in Greece and special care has to be taken in order to fight them. Discriminations at work and in educational settings are more often. Disability movements claim equal opportunities and confront stereotypes. They also claim new legislation, able to support their requests.

It is widely acknowledged that Greek society suffered from financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures, consequently the last topic was expended. Suicides and

poverty were the “hot” subjects of this section. Neglect of people with disabilities and psychological consequences were also mentioned. Insecure future and poor living conditions are in the center of the descriptions. It seems that people involved in Special Education are not indifferent in general problems of the society as a whole.

Conclusions

The present research in the field of education is a result of reviewing the relative bibliography that indicates a negative effect of financial crisis on Special Education. This effect was examined through the opinions of teachers of Special Education and also parents, and people with disabilities. The results suggest that various aspects of Special Education are affected negatively. However, more studies have to be conducted in order to come to clear conclusions. The limited number of participants does not permit generalization, however this research gives us valuable information about the beliefs of teachers and parents and also some suggestions that could be used in order to modify current legislation and structures of Special Education. Inclusive education seems to be a widespread request and also equal opportunities of people with disabilities. Another finding is that financial crisis had an enormous negative effect on Special Education but also on society as a whole. A subsequent investigation may refer to solutions and propose remedial measures.

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