

COMPENSATORY EDUCATION AND THE GREEK INSTITUTION OF INCLUSION CLASSES: A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper approaches the institution of inclusion classes (IC) in the Greek educational system through the lens of symbolic interaction theory. It aims to examine how Greek primary-school teachers construct, negotiate, and interpret the meanings of inclusion classes (ICs) as an institution of compensatory education, and how these meaning-making processes shape perceptions of IC effectiveness. A focus group was conducted with seven primary-education teachers (mainstream and special education, from kindergarten and primary school) working in the prefecture of Lesvos (Greece). The discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using discourse analysis, with themes developed through open and axial coding, researcher triangulation and an analytic audit. Five thematic axes emerged: IC as a countervailing educational policy; operational, logistical, and training difficulties; relations among members of the educational community; the negotiation of IC effectiveness; and the institution's contradictions. Findings indicate that ICs function not only as tools for compensatory education but primarily as arenas for the social negotiation of meanings, identities and roles. Despite ICs' positive role in supporting students with disabilities and/or special educational needs, shortages of resources, staff and institutional support, together with stigma and teachers' categorizations, often reproduce educational inequalities. The study contributes to the sociology of education by applying a symbolic interactionism lens to an under-researched aspect of Greek compensatory education, showing how everyday interactional practices mediate formal policy, and pointing to directions for a clearer institutional framework, systematic teacher training, and continuity in secondary education to strengthen IC's compensatory function.

Keywords

compensatory education, inclusion classes, symbolic interaction, focus group

Introduction

The institution of compensatory education

In the 1960s, the compensatory education movement emerged, a set of policies aimed at reducing social and educational inequalities. Causes of this movement included, in addition to economic rivalry between the USA and the USSR, strong social campaigns for greater access to education, fears of social unrest, the growth of the welfare state, and an emphasis on improving educational outcomes (Klepper, 2023). Additionally, since the 1960s, research has highlighted the link between low income and poor school performance, often resulting in school dropout among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Morrissey et al., 2015; Renth et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2019). Consequently, various efforts have been made, involving programs to support children and their families facing economic hardship, social alienation due to racial discrimination, or geographical isolation. These children often

experienced learning difficulties (Beatty, 2021; Comer et al., 2017; Kohn & Rosman, 1974), and the term 'equality of educational opportunity' was introduced. Equal educational opportunity involves recognizing differences among social groups and finding ways to address them.

From the mid-1960s, compensatory education programs started to emerge (Zigler et al., 1979). These programs included Head Start, launched in 1965, which represented a significant effort to promote social justice and equity in the US for people facing poverty and social exclusion (Hines, 2017; Zigler et al., 1979). Similar initiatives included the Primary Mental Health Project (Cowen et al., 1979), All-Day Neighbourhood Schools (Klepper, 2023), Success for All, and Comer's School Development Program, among others (Borman et al., 2001).

In Greece, various forms of compensatory education interventions, including inclusion classes, reception classes, tutorial classes, and remedial teaching, are being implemented. inclusion classes (IC) refer to a set of educational policies aimed at reducing social and educational inequalities (Giavrimis, 2022; 2024).

The institution of inclusion classes in Greece

In Greece, the institution of IC is an evolution of parallel and special classes, initially based on a medical-centred model to address difficulties. In Greece, the IC are special educational programs that operate within the public education system and aim to integrate students with disabilities and/or special educational needs into the general school classrooms. The first structures were introduced in the Greek educational system by Law no. 1143/1081 ("On special education, special vocational training, employment and social participation of persons deviating from the normal and other educational provisions"), which states in Article 3, paragraph 3b, that the education of "deviating" persons is also provided in special parallel classes, in sections operating within typical primary, secondary or vocational schools or in special classes for "deeper knowledge". Presidential Decree 603/82 ("Organization and operation of special education units") defines the name, types of special education units, persons attending them, and the way in which they operate. Law 1566/1985 ("Structure and operation of primary and secondary education and other provisions") confirms the operation of special classes in regular schools. It defines the objectives of their education, which relate to the "full and effective development and utilization of their potential and abilities", their "mutual acceptance by society as a whole", and their "integration into the productive process".

The law 2817/2000 ("Education of persons with special educational needs and other provisions") refers to individuals with special educational needs being able to attend the "ordinary classroom with parallel support from a special education teacher or in specially organized and appropriately staffed IC operating within schools of general and technical-vocational education" when this does not "become particularly difficult due to the nature and degree of their problem". According to Harupia (2005), the IC is a one-person unit attached to a general education school. It is called upon to respond to a wide range of needs of the student population.

Law 3699/2008 on special education ("Special Education and Education of persons with disabilities or with special educational needs") affirms the compulsory nature of special education. It pertains to the special education departments functioning within general and vocational schools, offering two distinct types of programs: a standard and specialized program, proposed by the relevant Centers for Diagnosis, Evaluation, and Support (KDAY, now called KESY - Centers of Educational Counseling and Support), which will not exceed fifteen (15) teaching hours per week; or a specialized group or individual extended-hour

program for students with more severe special educational needs (L. 3699/2008 - Government Gazette 199/A/2.10.2008, No. 6 Par. 1c).

In Table 1, as our research focuses on the prefecture of Lesvos, we present data for 2017-2022 on student attendance at the IC. The number of ICs in primary schools on Lesvos appears to be stable, ranging between 40 and 43 classes, while the number of students attending ICs has varied from 421 in 2017 to 472 in 2019. In terms of gender, boys comprise 61.8% to 65.8% of the students, while girls comprise 34.2% to 38.2%. The layouts in kindergartens vary in size and proportions. The number of ICs remains consistently low (7-9 classes) with a small pupil population (30-46 per year). In relation to gender, there is even more pronounced differentiation, as boys in almost all years make up an average of 71.6% of pupils, while girls make up 28.4%.

Table 1. From 2017 to 2020, the table below shows the number of students attending ICs in Kindergartens and Primary Schools in the prefecture of Lesvos

Prefecture of Lesvos	Year	Number of IC	Total Students		
			Total	Male	Female
Primary Schools	2022	42	435	274	161
	2020	40	442	273	169
	2019	43	472	303	169
	2018	43	456	293	163
	2017	43	421	277	144
Kindergartens	2022	9	46	35	11
	2020	8	30	24	6
	2019	7	31	23	8
	2018	8	35	26	9
	2017	9	30	16	14

Note: Processed data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority

Additionally, there is widespread underfunding and limited available funding (Greek Ombudsman, 2022). According to the National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities and a study on the transition from special education to inclusive education, 35% of students in inclusion classes were placed without any diagnostic assessment (National Confederation of Persons with Disabilities, 2020, p. 58). These inconsistencies raise serious questions not only about institutional regulation, but also about how teachers, in practice, interpret, justify and manage compensatory work under conditions of uncertainty. Against this background, the present study approaches ICs neither as a purely technical mechanism nor as a self-evident policy instrument, but as a contested symbolic space shaped by everyday interaction. The present study focuses empirically on how primary-school teachers, as key institutional actors, construct and negotiate the meaning of inclusion classes in their everyday professional practice.

Despite an expanding literature on compensatory and inclusive education, two gaps remain insufficiently addressed. First, most empirical work on the Greek case approaches ICs from a policy, legal or quantitative perspective, leaving under-explored how the professionals who actually operate the institution construct and negotiate its meaning in everyday practice. Second, symbolic interactionism has rarely been mobilized in the Greek literature on compensatory education. Drawing explicitly on a symbolic interactionist perspective, the

present paper asks how Greek primary-education teachers interpret, negotiate and stabilize the meaning of Inclusion Classes through everyday interaction, and how these interactional processes shape perceptions of effectiveness and contradiction. Accordingly, the objectives of the study are: (a) to analyze the meanings that teachers attribute to ICs in their daily work; (b) to identify the interactional processes through which these meanings are produced; and (c) to examine what these meanings imply for the role of ICs to reduce educational inequalities.

Theoretical framework

In contrast to structural-functional and outcome-oriented approaches, Symbolic Interactionism offers an analytical framework particularly suited to examining how educational institutions acquire meaning through everyday practice (Outhwaite, 2008). According to Blumer (1986, 2004), symbolic interaction is based on three principles: a) individuals act based on the meanings they create themselves; b) these meanings develop through their interactions with other social actors; and c) these meanings are organized and transformed through an interpretive process individuals use to understand reality. People collaboratively form interpretive schemas, interaction rituals, and social representations, which are ways of organizing their experiences (Collins, 2014; Schutz, 1970). For example, this includes Student-Teacher Types. Social representations are regarded as the social context of spatio-temporal agents (Fine, 2005). Social behavior occurs through a continuous, dynamic process of reflection. Conversely, social reality is viewed as an entity constructed through individuals' social actions and the symbolic decoding of meanings. People often transform elements of their context into symbols. These symbols manifest as perceptions and ideas that outline their interaction (White, 1940). Through this process, social actions and relationships are created and continually recreated, along with the rules that govern them. Normative rules, internalized through role-taking, and the social representations of daily life, mediate the dynamic exchanges among social actors (Garfinkel, 1996). These are not fixed but are jointly constructed, approved, and established through an open, dynamic process (Lamnias, 2002; Ballantine & Spade, 2008).

In this framework, schools and ICs are examined by emphasizing the actions of teachers and students, as well as their meaning-making processes regarding their behavior, motivations, beliefs, and contexts (classroom, school, community, etc.). The context is characterized by the meaning-making of social actors, social representations, and rituals related to everyday practices. This perspective enables the analysis of ICs not only as a policy instrument but also as a symbolic arena in which recognition, stigma, and professional identity are negotiated, dimensions that quantitative approaches typically leave in the background.

Compensatory and inclusive provisions in international literature (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020; Kim, 2022; Morrissey et al., 2014; Napoletano, 2024; Renth et al., 2015; Outhwaite et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2019) have real but bounded effects, and those effects depend heavily on interactional and institutional conditions that are rarely examined on their own terms. In the Greek context, empirical work on ICs has been predominantly descriptive, policy-oriented or focused on measurable outcomes, with comparatively little attention to how educators themselves construct and negotiate the meaning of the institution (Giavrimis, 2024; Ioannidi & Malafantis, 2022). This is the specific gap the present study seeks to address by combining a symbolic interactionist lens with a close, interactional reading of teachers' discourse.

Method

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design, consistent with its symbolic interactionist framework and its focus on the meanings educators ascribe to ICs. A single focus group was chosen as the primary research tool because the object of analysis is not individual opinion in isolation, but the interactional production of shared, contested and emergent meanings among professionals in a shared work environment (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Iosifidis, 2003; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Focus groups are particularly appropriate when the phenomenon under study is collectively constructed in everyday practice, as the group setting makes visible the negotiation of categories, disagreements and shared framings that would be difficult to elicit through individual interviews (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). The study is exploratory and context-specific: its aim is not statistical generalization but analytical depth within a clearly delimited empirical setting (primary education in the prefecture of Lesvos).

Participants

Our research participants were randomly selected from the official lists of primary education teachers in the prefecture of Lesvos (Greece). Participants were approached to ensure diversity in role (mainstream vs special education), school level (kindergarten and primary), gender, years of service and urban/rural setting. The number of participants was set at seven, consistent with the recommended size for a single focus group (6–10), which is large enough to sustain plural perspectives yet small enough to allow every participant to contribute substantively and the moderator to manage turn-taking (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). The participants included four males and three females. Among them, there were three mainstream education teachers, two special education teachers, one mainstream kindergarten teacher, and one special education kindergarten teacher. Other characteristics of the participants are presented in **Table 2**. A single focus group cannot claim statistical representativeness; the composition was instead designed to achieve informational saturation regarding the research questions. All participants provided informed written consent; anonymity was preserved by replacing names with codes P1–P7, and the discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 2. Characteristics of participants

Years of experience		Age		Area	
1-5 years	1	Up to 30 years old	1	Urban	4
6-15 years	2	30-40 years old	1	Rural areas	3
16-25 years	3	40-50 years old	2		
26 years and over	1	50 years and over	3		

Conduct of the focus group and data analysis

The research team appointed a moderator and two assistants to organize the discussion. An interview guide was created to direct the process, covering discussion topics (derived from the literature analysis) and the individual research questions. The questions in the guide were arranged so that those related to familiarizing with the context were asked first, followed by questions about exploring the research topic. The questions covered the purpose of the ICs, information about attendees (including their selection and treatment), logistical infrastructure, support services, cooperation with other teaching staff, teachers' views on the ICs, and participants' comments and suggestions. An information sheet was also

prepared for participants, outlining the process rules and seeking their consent to be recorded during the discussion. Discourse analysis was used to analyze the data, focusing on the action orientation of talk. The sentence served as the basis for categorizing and interpreting the discourse in the focus group (Hepburn & Potter, 2004).

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the transcript was read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, open coding produced initial descriptive codes anchored in participants' utterances. Third, codes were grouped into candidate themes through axial coding, using the interview-guide questions as organizing anchors and symbolic interactionism as the sensitizing framework (Blumer, 1986; Hepburn & Potter, 2004). Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined, resulting in five thematic axes reported in the findings. Each axis is illustrated with verbatim quotations to ground interpretations in the data. To enhance credibility and dependability, coding was carried out independently by two members of the research team, disagreements were resolved through discussion, and a third researcher audited the final thematic structure. The researchers reflected on their positionality as academics with prior involvement in Greek special-education research. They kept an analytic log of decisions, so that the pathway from raw discourse to themes is traceable.

Credibility, dependability and researcher positionality

Credibility was supported by methodological triangulation (audio recordings, transcripts, field notes), peer debriefing, and thick description in reporting findings. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a documented audit trail (coding scheme, decision memos, revisions to the thematic structure) and by the dual-coding procedure described above. Confirmability was supported by reflexive memos in which the lead researcher kept an ongoing record of analytical decisions, emerging assumptions, and potential biases.

Researcher positionality is integral to interpretive work. The lead researcher is a sociologist of education with prior research and teaching experience in compensatory and inclusive education in Greece. This background facilitated access and rapport but also risked the researcher sharing participants' professional 'common sense'. To mitigate this risk, the moderator used open, non-leading prompts during the session; the interview guide was reviewed by a researcher external to the field of special education; and reflexive notes were used throughout the analysis to flag moments when the researchers' prior assumptions might be shaping interpretation. The findings are therefore presented as one analytically disciplined reading of the data, not as the only possible one.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of the Aegean and with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki as applied to social research. Participation was voluntary, informed and revocable at any stage. No identifying information is reported; all quotations are attributed to pseudonyms and, where necessary, minor contextual details have been adjusted to prevent indirect identification. Audio recordings are stored on encrypted devices accessible only to the research team.

Findings

Five interrelated thematic axes emerged from the discourse-analytic procedure: (a) IC as a countervailing educational policy; (b) institutional and operational difficulties; (c) relationships within the educational community; (d) negotiated effectiveness; and (e) institutional contradictions.

Thematic Axis 1: IC as a countervailing educational policy

In this thematic axis, participants discuss the role of inclusion classes as a form of compensatory education that supports students with learning difficulties or behavioral issues. They also emphasize the importance of early intervention, the assessment and selection process for pupils, and the challenges caused by delays in formal assessments. The axis shows that IC is seen as an institution that offers educational opportunities but also faces practical constraints.

IC is seen as a key inclusion mechanism because it helps students with difficulties participate equally in the school community. They serve as a space for compensatory intervention, complementing the formal classroom. P5: *“The aim is to help some children with difficulties or behavioral problems to integrate into the group slowly”*. P1: *“It is a compensatory intervention that helps the child not to be left behind and to participate equally in the classroom”*.

It is emphasized that early diagnosis, particularly in kindergarten and the first grades of primary school, can prevent problems from becoming more severe and can significantly enhance children's learning path. P2: *“Especially in kindergarten, we are talking about early intervention, which can prevent more serious difficulties later on”*. P5: *“The earlier the diagnosis and support, the better the results”*.

The core of the IC function is to provide targeted support to pupils with learning needs, enabling them to keep pace with their peers. P1: *“They target pupils with learning difficulties... by improving the child as a learner, they will be able to fit in more smoothly”*.

Regarding the institutional framework, it was evident that teachers are aware of the formal assessment process and student selection for IC, but do not always follow it. They claim that KESY assessments are often delayed, resulting in lost time. For this reason, they take students' opinions (informally) at the beginning of the year, believing it will help them immediately. P4: *“... The class teacher makes a first approach. The first thing. This has to do with how important the difficulties the child is facing are, ... After he gets the KESY paper, he is referred; otherwise, his assessment is done by the class teacher, an informal assessment...”*

In addition, participants' discourse indicates that, in cases of behavioral problems, teachers find it helpful to integrate the IC. At the same time, attendance hours are often described as insufficient. P6: *“...No, no, the student who has a behavioral problem has his time and days with me...”*.

Thematic axis 2: Difficulties of the IC institution

Participants concentrate on the functional, structural, and institutional challenges associated with ICs. Gaps in legislation, informal practices, limited input from support agencies (KESY, school counsellors, psychologists), parental denial, and lack of time are key issues. Simultaneously, difficulties in implementing curricula and the limited training or education of teachers are emphasized. Participants' accounts portray the institution as internally contradictory, with teachers more often experiencing it as an individualized professional endeavor than as a consolidated institutional intervention.

Operational and administrative difficulties

Teachers often stress that they frequently operate outside the formal framework, making decisions based on students' needs because the institutional framework is unclear. P3: *“Decision of the teachers' association... informally again, I will say informally”*. *“Many things are done without a clear framework”*. P1: *“The legislation does not cover us in all cases”*.

Bodies such as the CPS and school counsellors do not often visit primary schools due to system malfunctions. Teachers note that, in addition to the evaluation and the opinion provided by the KESY, they would like a specific action plan from the aforementioned body, as well as the presence of a school psychologist and a parent counsellor. P5: *“The special education adviser is based in Syros and serves 43 islands... They only come when we ask them and for specific cases...”*. P7: *“There is only one thing that I think was not covered, and it is indirectly linked to the KESY. I think the fact that we only have a diagnosis is problematic, ... I mean, giving me five pages of problems to solve without suggesting how to solve them tells me absolutely nothing. Specific actions must be proposed on the various issues ...”*.

Additionally, delays in consultations and the refusal of some parents to accept their children's difficulties are significant obstacles to effective treatment. P3: *“Children are attending without a KESY paper”*. P4: *“Many parents refuse to take the child for a diagnosis”*. P1: *“The delay in the appointments of the KESY prevents us from organizing the intervention”*.

Often, due to practical constraints (a large number of pupils), teachers are forced to select a limited number of pupils for the IC at their discretion. It is also reported that the time for students to attend these is usually insufficient. P2: *“The hours a child attends IC are not sufficient. Of course, we often modify the program to meet the child's individual needs. I have 6 ... 10 children, what I would say is that it is too many to respond to what each one wants...”*.

There is a serious need for specialized training and an increase in the number of special educators, speech-language therapists, and psychologists. P7: *“We need speech and language therapists and psychologists, but there are none”*.

Teachers point out that there are not enough hours of sessions to meet the needs of all children. P3: *“There should be a daily session, but we do not have the time”*. P5: *“The large number of students and the time limit us a lot”*.

While there is a general guideline, in practice, programs are tailored on a case-by-case basis, highlighting the lack of clear institutional guidance. Teachers do not strictly follow the curriculum but adapt it to their sensitivity, knowledge, and experience. In this area, teachers of formal education appear to lack a sufficient understanding of the process outlined in the curriculum. The concept of IC is experienced through contradictory meanings and practices. Formal procedures coexist with informal ones, illustrating the fluidity of the interaction field. P3: *“We have a bushel, but I do not follow them to the letter. There is much flexibility....”*. P6: *“I do not think there is a curriculum, and I also know that there are divided opinions that there should not be one because of the specificity and different objectives of each student. Others say that there should be a bushel, in the sense that there should be some texts, some supervisory material to refer to, to help you”*.

Shortcomings in the logistical infrastructure

It is found that, in terms of logistical infrastructure, there is a significant lack of infrastructure and essential equipment. Classrooms are often inadequate, and supervisory materials are provided at teachers' personal expense. P1: *“In the school, we borrow or use together with the next school the IC, we host the teacher in our own school, in our own room, because the school upstairs does not have one. This room was a small office that we converted into a classroom. We converted it, and it works as a classroom...”*. P3: *“In our school, there is no separate room for IC. The special educator coexists with the kindergarten teacher of the classical one inside, and when she needs ... she has it in a small hall between the two classes outside the toilets...”*.

Funding for ICs from the state is reported to be meagre, and the needs of the teachers working in them are met either by the school unit, parent associations, or the teachers

themselves. P4: *"I would say that the funding is small, we work with what we find", or "we exchange materials with each other", or "we make it together according to the needs..."*.

The supervisory material is a personal quest of the IC teachers. *"There are no different materials; we are forced to make our own"*. P5: *"I have carried my personal things to the Integration Class to work with the children"*.

In many cases, the students' parents support the *Inclusion Classes*. P3: *"I have asked the parents to help me with the computers... The school knows its potential"*.

Insufficient teacher training and education

Participants report that training for special education teachers is insufficient, particularly in areas related to gifted children. Inadequate training leads to ineffective student support, which, in turn, affects their academic performance. P7: *"There are no training seminars, and everyone is trying to do it on their own..."*. P1: *"And this is because there is no information, there is no training, and that is why there is this whole vicious circle. If everyone knew, they would not..."*.

Thematic axis 3: Relations and interaction between members of the educational community

Focus group participants referred to the quality of relationships that develop between teachers, parents, students and principals. The roles of societal stigma and parental influence, the importance of cooperation between teachers and families, and the crucial role of management in mediation are evident. It also highlights how families' socio-economic background and teachers' categorizations can influence students' progress.

Stigmatization of students attending IC is evident, not by their peers, but by the adult-parent-society, as attendance at IC comes with a "label". Several students have given up, while many parents, despite IC's positive contributions, view it with skepticism and caution. P4: *"... There are also these labels that I have seen IC. Many parents of children with learning difficulties cite it as a negative".* Many say, *"Well, I would like my child to attend class, not IC, though"*. P6: *"However, some parents accept their child attending KESY; they do not accept their child attending IC, so that the child is not stigmatized..."*.

Additionally, teachers attribute many students' learning behavior to their parents' low socioeconomic status, which influences teachers' attitudes towards students. P2: *"...in any case, it has to do with the problematic family and the problematic family environment, and I do not mean at the educational level..."*

The principal critically mediates by setting boundaries, informing parents and supporting teachers. P5: *"The principal is the one who sets the boundaries and does the informing to parents"*. P1: *"If there is no support from the administration, our work is left up in the air"*.

At the same time, collaboration between IC teachers and formal class teachers is considered very useful and practical for working more efficiently with students, but it is not always a given. P5: *"What is more practical, what could be done is a collaboration, not informal, i.e. having a coffee and talking about a student, ... When did we get together?... it is a luxury..."*. P3: *"Where there is collaboration with the class teacher and the parent, there is a good outcome"*. P7: *"Colleagues who support me make my work more meaningful"*. P2: *"Without collaboration with parents, the child's progress is minimal"*.

Thematic axis 4: Making sense of the effectiveness of ICs

Teachers' accounts of IC effectiveness are marked by ambivalence, oscillating between narratives of measurable progress and enduring skepticism about students' long-term trajectories. The axis reflects the institution's contradictions and multiple meanings.

Students benefit from improved performance and more active participation in class. P3: *"IC once they are in the daily life of the school, they make a great contribution", "We have seen children who have really progressed because of the Inclusion Class"*.

At the same time, some participants report that, regarding the integration of IC students into the formal classroom, they are unaware of any cases in which children have been integrated without problems. They consider that these students cannot fully overcome their deficiencies. P5: *"It is difficult for them to achieve this goal... There is a background that does not allow them to have the stimuli"*. P3: *"I think there are very few cases when the child attends the class with minimal gaps. I think a child starts with learning disabilities and ends with learning disabilities..."*.

It is noted that teachers may, unconsciously, categorize students with deficient socio-economic backgrounds as weak, which can impact their school performance. This can result in a predetermined path for these students, making it difficult for IC to provide compensatory work. P2: *"... The biggest frustration is that many times these children have given up and are not doing the work that they are put in..."*. P4: *"...They came to T, E children. They came because it was their need to be in a supportive context, some different approach..."*.

Thematic axis 5: Contradictions of the IC institution

The final axis emphasizes the institution's limitations and contradictions. On one hand, it proposes expanding the role of ICs to include gifted students or children with diverse needs. On the other hand, it highlights the lack of continuity in secondary education, which undermines many of the efforts made in primary education.

Teachers believe that ICs can develop into spaces for creativity and not just support for learning difficulties. P3: *"Abroad, I know that IC also caters for gifted children"*. P3: *"They could also support children with other needs, not just difficulties"*. P1: *"IC can develop into a space of creativity for all pupils"*.

They also consider it a disadvantage that there is no continuity between the institution's primary and secondary education. The inadequacy of IC in secondary education leads to fragmentation, as the support provided in primary school is often not sustained. P7: *"IC cannot be done in a school today, and with tomorrow's IC, the effort is left in vain. That is to say, there should be continuity in secondary education. Very few secondary education departments exist..."*.

Discussion

Symbolic interaction theory, as formulated by Mead (1967) and developed by Blumer (1986), holds that meanings and identities are shaped through social interaction. In the school context, inclusion classes (ICs) are not merely an institution of compensatory education but a space for creating and negotiating meanings, where teachers, students, and parents form relationships and social roles. Their influence, whether positive or negative, depends on how these meanings are negotiated daily within the school microenvironment. The function of ICs is not limited to learning support. Participants' statements indicate that participation in ICs is connected to the formation of an identity recognized by others. Mead (1967) describes the "social ego" as a product of interaction, so ICs are the social spaces where students gain or lack this social recognition.

From participants' discourse, it emerged that the institution of IC in Greek education is established as an area of compensatory intervention to support students with learning difficulties or behavioral problems. Teachers emphasize the role of ICs as mechanisms that promote social and educational equality, with particular emphasis on the importance of early intervention. Early diagnosis and support, particularly in pre-school and primary school, are

considered crucial to children's smooth academic progress and improved social integration. IC functions as a 'symbolic field' (Mead, 1967), in which the child is recognized as an active member of the group. Early intervention has a cognitive dimension; it is also a process of social recognition, in which the child learns to interact equally with peers and teachers (Outhwaite et al., 2020; Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Zigler & Valentine, 1979).

Simultaneously, the institution faces significant structural and organizational challenges that constrain its effectiveness. The absence of a clear institutional framework, reliance on informal practices, insufficient teacher training, and difficulties in collaborating with bodies such as the KESYs and school counsellors hinder the achievement of the goal of systematic intervention. Additionally, delays in diagnosis and frequent parental refusal to recognize their children's difficulties, combined with a lack of time and logistical support, mean that the functioning of IC often depends on teachers' personal motivation. Actors (teachers, parents, institutional stakeholders) define the meaning of IC through their practices (Blumer, 1986). When the institutional context is unclear, symbolic interactions carry greater significance than formal institutional texts; therefore, meaning-making within the institution relies on teachers' daily actions. In fact, education can be seen as a field that promotes the "privileged", thus excluding members of the learning community from access to educational and social resources (Ballantine & Hammack, 2009; Bourdieu, 1974). Responsibilities for learning and psychosocial challenges are individualized, and students face the risk of their learning difficulties without institutional support networks. The individuals and their abilities are emphasized as the highest value, while cultural capital and individual differences are diminished in the pursuit of equal opportunities and meritocracy (Hemelhoet, 2012; Napoletano, 2024).

Moreover, the stigma associated with a student's participation in IC, together with socioeconomic inequalities and the categorizations often made by teachers, demonstrate that inclusion is not always straightforward. Students may experience conflicting feelings of acceptance and rejection. Participants' divergent assessments, together with their awareness of pre-categorization risks, point to the coexistence of empowering and constraining dynamics within the same institutional space. According to Goffman (2001), social interactions shape persons and identities, and students in such contradictory contexts often develop fragile identities. Acts of stigmatization, labelling, and stereotypical perceptions can lead a student attending IC to perceive a distorted social identity and harbor low self-worth. IC students adjust their behavior based on the meanings and interpretations they assign to others' actions within the school community. Negative staff attitudes towards them, combined with their categorization, deprive them of fundamental social resources (such as a sense of belonging) and educational opportunities (such as participation in formal classrooms), ultimately fostering feelings of rejection. However, cooperation can change this dynamic, transforming IC from a space of marginalization into one of empowerment. The involvement of parents, teachers, and principals is essential for the success of interventions, as their absence can undermine teachers' efforts (Comer et al., 2017; Haywood, 1982; Kim, 2022; Soyulu, 2022).

Participants interpret the effectiveness of IC differently. Some argue that students benefit significantly on both learning and psychosocial levels, while others question whether learning difficulties and marginalization can be overcome. This dual perspective shows that IC is a field in which the empowerment of students' identities and their possible deconstruction coexist. The concept of "effectiveness" emerges from the process of negotiation through interaction (Blumer, 1969). Students and teachers, drawing on their experiences, demonstrate the value of IC, indicating that success is measured not only by cognitive criteria but also by social experiences of acceptance (Behtoui & Strömberg, 2020).

Finally, the participants highlight contradictions about the institution's role and future. On the one hand, they suggest expanding the functions of ICs to support not only children with difficulties but also “gifted” pupils. On the other hand, they emphasize the lack of continuity in secondary education, which often negates the progress made in primary education. Thus, the institutional framework appears fragmented, leaving ICs unable to ensure long-term inclusion and equal opportunities for all pupils. The debate over role expansion illustrates the dynamic nature of meaning (Mead, 1934). IC is not a fixed institution but a “symbolic arena” where roles are re-imagined. The lack of continuity in secondary schools results in “identity fragmentation” for students, emphasizing the need for a coherent framework for inclusion. The data from our research neither vindicate a technocratic reading of ICs as a well-functioning compensatory mechanism, nor support a purely critical reading that reduces them to an apparatus of reproduction. They rather point to a middle ground, consistent with the broader literature on inclusive education (Comer et al., 2017; Haywood, 1982; Kim, 2022; Soylu, 2022): ICs can act as spaces of empowerment or marginalization depending on the quality of institutional support, the density of micro-social cooperation and the symbolic framings that dominate in a given school. The Greek case thus illustrates, within its own institutional specificity, a more general sociological proposition: compensatory policies are only as effective as the interactional conditions that sustain them.

Limitations

The findings should be read in light of several limitations. The analysis relies on a single focus group of seven teachers in a single Greek prefecture, which limits the transferability of the findings to other regions or levels of education. Because participants were recruited from a single prefecture, the study offers analytical rather than statistical generalization. The voices of students, parents and institutional stakeholders (e.g., KESY staff, school counsellors) are not directly represented and are refracted only through teachers' accounts. Also, the data captures a specific moment in the participants' professional experience and cannot track how meanings evolve over time; a longitudinal or multi-site design would be needed to address this dimension. Some of the interpretive claims, particularly those concerning stigma and labelling, are grounded in teachers' discourse rather than in direct observation of classroom interaction or student experience, and should therefore be treated as hypotheses about interactional dynamics rather than as established facts. Future research could productively extend this work through multi-site focus groups, ethnographic classroom observation, and mixed-methods designs that triangulate teachers', parents' and students' accounts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that inclusion classes occupy a central but precarious position in the architecture of compensatory education in Greek primary schools. From the perspective of the seven teachers who participated in this focus group, ICs provide meaningful support to students with learning difficulties and are widely endorsed as a principle of educational equity. Yet their day-to-day functioning depends more on personal strategies, informal collaboration, and local workarounds than on a consolidated institutional framework. Shortages of human and material resources, unclear institutional boundaries and the social perceptions that associate IC attendance with stigma significantly constrain their effectiveness. Within the bounds of teachers' accounts examined in this study, ICs appear as symbolic spaces that may function either as tools of empowerment or as settings in which educational inequalities are reproduced. Which of the two prevails depends on the quality of social and institutional relationships on the interpretive frameworks participants bring to their

work (Blumer, 1986), and on whether the roles available to students encourage acceptance or stigmatization (Goffman, 2017).

Within the bounds indicated in discussion, the study points to several directions for policy and practice: consolidating a clear institutional framework and extending it into secondary education providing sustained and practical training for all teachers who work with ICs; developing suitable pedagogical materials; improving material conditions; fostering structured cooperation with KESY and school counsellors actively countering stigma; and strengthening the presence of psychologists and family counsellors in schools. Grounded in the interactional dynamics identified in teachers' discourse, such measures would not guarantee outcomes but would strengthen the symbolic and institutional conditions under which ICs could operate in accordance with their compensatory mandate.

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