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*Original Article*

# From Policy Commitment to School Practice: Structural Constraints on Inclusive Primary Education in Greece

**Eleftheria Tsiouri**[1,2*]

**Abstract:** Although inclusive education is firmly established in international rights frameworks and Greek education policy, its implementation remains constrained by structural barriers. This qualitative single-case study examines how institutional conditions shape inclusive education in a Greek public primary school serving approximately 180–200 students across six grade levels. Drawing on school practices, institutional records, and reflective practitioner narratives, the study identifies staffing instability, physical inaccessibility, unclear accountability, and socioeconomic pressures as key constraints. The findings reveal that inclusive practices rely heavily on local agency and professional commitment, with educators improvising adaptations and reconstructing collaborative routines to compensate for inadequate systemic support. While these efforts sustain participation, they render inclusion fragile and dependent on individual initiative. Through policy-enactment and critical-inclusion perspectives, the study demonstrates a persistent misalignment between policy ambitions and institutional capacity. It argues that sustainable inclusion requires stable staffing, accessible infrastructure, clearly defined responsibilities, and accountability frameworks that recognize context-responsive educational work. The case contributes to international debates by illustrating how systemic shortcomings are translated into everyday challenges in Greek primary education.

**Keywords:** Greek primary education; Inclusive education; Policy enactment, School-level agency; Structural constraints.

**Author Affiliation:**
[1] Department of Educational Sciences and Social Work, University of Patras, Greece
[2] Head of the 3rd Primary School of Ioannina, Greece

***Corresponding author(s):**
Eleftheria Tsiouri, Department of Educational Sciences and Social Work, University of Patras, Archimedes Street, Building 7, Rio, Patras 26504, Greece.
riatsiouri1@gmail.com

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is established in international policy and research as a rights-based commitment to equity and participation for all students. Nevertheless, its implementation remains uneven across educational systems, revealing a persistent gap between formally articulated entitlements and students' everyday experiences in schools.

Existing scholarship indicates that this gap cannot be explained simply as a failure of schools or educators to comply with policy. Instead, inclusive provision is shaped by the interaction of policy interpretation, resource availability, institutional organization, and local professional capacity (Ainscow, 2020; Murillo-Jiménez *et al.*, 2025). Research further highlights that barriers to inclusion may arise from inadequate institutional resources, insufficient professional expertise, and difficulties in implementing inclusive policies within existing school structures (Faizal *et al.*, 2020; Murillo-Jiménez *et al.*, 2025). Although these factors are widely recognized, less attention has been given to how multiple constraints, including staffing instability, inaccessible infrastructure, accountability ambiguity, and socioeconomic inequality, interact within a single school and influence educators' responses. Examining these interactions is necessary to understand why inclusive policies produce uneven outcomes even when formal commitments and professional willingness are present (Ainscow, 2020).

In this context, policy implementation is not simply a matter of compliance with formal directives; it is a process of policy enactment through which educators interpret and translate centrally defined expectations within the specific material and organizational conditions of their schools (Ball *et al.*, 2012). In the centralized Greek education system, this process is shaped by the timing and continuity of staff appointments, the availability of specialist support, the accessibility of school facilities, opportunities for professional development, and the distribution of responsibilities across administrative levels. These factors interact rather than operate independently: delayed specialist appointments, for example, can weaken collaborative planning, while inaccessible facilities require school staff to reorganize activities through local and temporary solutions. Inclusive education therefore emerges through the interaction between national policy expectations and school-level capacity, with uneven resources and institutional conditions producing corresponding variation in implementation (Kenny *et al.*, 2023; Papadimitriou & Koutsoklenis, 2023).

Structural and institutional constraints have therefore become central to contemporary debates on inclusive education. Insufficient resources, limited specialist support, accessibility barriers, and unclear accountability arrangements do not operate as isolated difficulties; they interact to determine which students can participate, the forms of support available to them, and the consistency with which inclusive provision can be sustained. When formal entitlements are not accompanied by adequate staffing, accessible infrastructure, and clearly allocated responsibilities, responsibility for implementation shifts from the education system to individual schools and educators (Murillo-Jiménez *et al.*, 2025; Paulsrud, 2024). This shift reveals a tension between system-wide coordination and local discretion. Central regulation can establish common rights and expectations, but centrally defined requirements without corresponding resources may restrict schools' capacity to enact them. Conversely, local discretion can enable context-responsive adaptations, yet reliance on school-level initiative can produce uneven provision because access then depends on the resources, professional capacity, and commitment available in each school. Local agency therefore functions simultaneously as a source of inclusive innovation and as evidence of systemic weakness. Sustainable inclusion requires alignment among policy objectives, resource allocation, accountability mechanisms, and school-level

capacity so that flexibility enriches provision rather than compensates for deficiencies in systemic design (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Ainscow, 2020).

The centralized Greek public education system provides a particularly relevant context for examining how inclusive policy is enacted under structural constraints. Greece has established institutional provisions intended to support students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, but implementation remains uneven because schools must translate centrally defined expectations into practice with variable staffing, specialist support, and material resources (Nteropoulou-Nterou, 2023; Papadimitriou & Koutsoklenis, 2023). Research on inclusion classes in Greek primary schools similarly indicates that educators' interpretations and implementation choices are shaped by the political, institutional, and social conditions of their schools (Panagiotis, 2024). Comparative evidence from Greece and Portugal further shows that structured school-based interventions can strengthen students' social participation when they are supported by sustained collaboration among teachers and other professionals (Toulia *et al.*, 2022). The comparative value of this evidence lies in demonstrating that formal inclusion policies alone do not ensure consistent practice: their effectiveness also depends on the organizational capacity of individual schools. In the Greek context, delays or discontinuities in specialist staffing, limitations in physical accessibility, and unclear coordination responsibilities can therefore make inclusive provision dependent on local adaptation rather than stable systemic support (Giavrimis, 2024; Papadimitriou & Koutsoklenis, 2023).

This paper presents a qualitative case study of inclusive education in a Greek public primary school. Rather than evaluating inclusion as a binary outcome, it examines how staffing continuity, physical accessibility, accountability arrangements, and socioeconomic pressures shape the enactment and sustainability of inclusive practices. This perspective conceptualizes inclusion as an ongoing process that requires the identification of contextual barriers, institutional capacity, and coordinated action across different levels of the education system (Ainscow, 2020; Chow *et al.*, 2024). Research on inclusive education in Greece also highlights the importance of teacher support arrangements and the organizational conditions under which inclusive practices are implemented in mainstream schools (Koutsoklenis & Papadimitriou, 2024; Vlachou, 2006). The study addresses the following research question: How do structural and policy conditions shape the enactment of inclusive education in a Greek public primary school, and how does the school respond to these conditions in everyday practice? By examining how these constraints interact, the study explores how responsibility for sustaining inclusion can shift from the education system to individual schools and educators when institutional support and resources are insufficient (Ainscow, 2020; Chow *et al.*, 2024). Its distinctive contribution lies in connecting policy interpretation to the material and organizational capacity available for implementation, thereby providing context-specific evidence from Greece that contributes to international debates on the conditions required for sustainable and equitable inclusive education, while highlighting the importance of aligning institutional resources, professional support, and policy objectives across diverse educational contexts.

## THEORETICAL SUPPORT

### Critical Perspective on Inclusive Education

This study adopts a critical understanding of inclusive education as a socio-political and systemic project rather than solely a technical or pedagogical undertaking. From this perspective, exclusion is produced not only through classroom practices and individual attitudes but also through the distribution of resources, institutional governance, accountability arrangements, and material conditions (Slee, 2018; Ainscow, 2020). Inclusive education should therefore be understood as an ongoing process of identifying and removing barriers to students' access, participation, and learning, rather than as a binary condition in which schools are simply classified as inclusive or non-inclusive (Ainscow, 2020; Norwich, 2022). This perspective directs attention to the institutional and political arrangements that determine whether schools can respond equitably to diverse learning needs.

In public education systems, the realization of inclusive education depends on how educational responsibilities are distributed, how resources are allocated, and how policy expectations are communicated and supported. Formal commitments to inclusion do not necessarily guarantee equitable educational experiences when the institutional capacity required for implementation is insufficient. Accordingly, this study examines inclusion as a relationship between policy commitments and the structural conditions that enable or constrain their realization in everyday school practice. This critical perspective provides the foundation for investigating how systemic arrangements may reproduce educational inequalities even when schools and educators demonstrate a commitment to inclusion.

### Policy-Enactment Theory

To explain how system-level conditions are translated into school practice, this study draws on policy-enactment theory. Policies are not transferred unchanged from official documents to classrooms; rather, school leaders and educators interpret, translate, negotiate, and enact them within particular organizational cultures and material circumstances (Ball *et al.*, 2012). Policy enactment is therefore shaped by the interaction between formal expectations, professional interpretations, available resources, and the practical circumstances in which educational work takes place. This approach shifts the analytical focus from whether policies have been formally adopted to how they are understood and enacted in everyday school settings.

This distinction is particularly important in centralized education systems, where nationally defined expectations may coexist with limited school-level autonomy, competing administrative demands, and uneven institutional resources. Under these conditions, educators must reconcile formal policy requirements with the practical realities of their schools. As a result, inclusive education policies may be adapted, partially realized, or constrained during implementation. Critical inclusion and policy-enactment theory are complementary in this respect: the former identifies the structural conditions through which exclusion and inequality may be produced, while the latter explains how educational actors interpret and respond to those conditions. Together, these perspectives provide a

framework for examining how inclusive education is enabled, adapted, or constrained in the everyday practices of a Greek public primary school (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Ainscow, 2020).

**Structural Conditions and Institutional Capacity**

Structural conditions constitute a central component of the analytical framework. Staffing continuity, accessible infrastructure, reliable funding, clearly defined professional responsibilities, and coherent accountability arrangements influence whether inclusive education can be sustained beyond isolated initiatives. These conditions should not be treated as separate administrative concerns because they interact to shape the capacity of schools to organize appropriate support, coordinate professional work, and respond consistently to students' diverse needs (Norwich, 2022). When institutional resources and organizational arrangements are inadequate, inclusive provision may become dependent on temporary interventions rather than being embedded in routine school practice. Within the Greek education system, these structural conditions are particularly relevant to the organization of special educational support in mainstream classrooms. Research on the recruitment and deployment of teachers providing parallel support has identified delays in staffing and structural barriers that can affect the continuity of support for students with special educational needs and disabilities (Koutsoklenis & Papadimitriou, 2024). Similarly, coordination between general and special education professionals is important for clarifying responsibilities and organizing appropriate provision. Agaliotis and Kalyva (2011) examined Greek teachers' perceptions of the role of special educational needs coordinators, highlighting the relevance of professional coordination to inclusive education policy and practice.

Parallel support provides a particularly useful example of the relationship between policy intentions and institutional capacity. Although this arrangement is intended to facilitate the participation of students with identified additional needs in mainstream classrooms, its effectiveness depends on staffing continuity, role clarity, professional collaboration, and the organization of support. When these conditions are insufficient, the availability of a formally established support provision does not necessarily translate into consistent or equitable participation. Structural constraints therefore shape what schools can realistically achieve and how inclusive practices are organized, sustained, and experienced in everyday school life, irrespective of educators' commitment or leadership aspirations (Koutsoklenis & Papadimitriou, 2024).

**Professional and Institutional Agency**

The framework also acknowledges the importance of professional and institutional agency. Educators do not simply receive and apply inclusive education policies; they interpret, translate, and adapt them within the material and organizational conditions of their schools. From an ecological perspective, teacher agency emerges through the interaction of professional capacities, past experiences, future aspirations, and the cultural and structural resources available in particular settings (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). Inclusive practice should therefore be understood neither as the inevitable outcome of policy requirements nor as the product of individual commitment alone, but as a situated process

shaped by the relationship between systemic constraints and educators' professional decisions.

Professional autonomy, collaboration, teacher–student relationships, and access to appropriate resources influence educators' capacity to respond to diverse classroom needs. Research involving teachers in Greece has also shown that beliefs and fears concerning disability can influence teaching practices and responses to inclusive education (Lyra *et al.*, 2023). These findings underline the importance of considering both the professional and institutional dimensions of inclusive practice. Teachers' willingness to adapt instruction may support student participation, but their capacity to sustain such adaptations also depends on access to professional support, sufficient time, and workable organizational arrangements. Nevertheless, professional agency remains structurally bounded. Local adaptations and collaborative initiatives may help maintain participation when formal support is inadequate, but they cannot fully substitute for stable staffing, accessible infrastructure, clearly allocated responsibilities, and sufficient resources. This framework consequently treats school-level initiative as both a potential source of inclusive change and an indicator of the extent to which the wider system enables or constrains equitable provision. Examining professional agency alongside structural conditions makes it possible to understand how educators respond to institutional limitations without attributing systemic implementation problems solely to individual teachers or school leaders (Priestley *et al.*, 2015; Ainscow, 2020).

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to examine how inclusive education was enacted under structural and policy constraints in a Greek public primary school. A case study design was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth investigation of the interaction between policy expectations, institutional conditions, and everyday educational practice within a bounded setting (Yin, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant to inclusive education, where the implementation of formal policy is shaped by context-specific organizational capacities and constraints (Norwich, 2022).

The case school operates within the centralized Greek public education system, which is characterized by nationally prescribed curricula and limited school-level autonomy. It is located in a medium-sized urban area, serves approximately 180–200 students across six grade levels, and draws its student population from families with varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Its staff includes general education teachers, specialist subject teachers, and special education personnel providing targeted support to students with additional educational needs. The school has implemented differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and initiatives intended to strengthen the participation of students with diverse learning profiles. At the same time, it has experienced staff turnover, limitations in building accessibility, and changing national accountability and evaluation expectations. These characteristics made the school analytically relevant for examining the gap between inclusive policy commitments and schools' practical capacity to realize them.

The researcher occupied a practitioner-researcher position and participated in the school's administrative and pedagogical processes during the period examined. This

position provided sustained access to decision-making concerning staff coordination, inclusive initiatives, policy enactment, and responses to structural constraints. However, it also created risks of over-identification with the institutional setting, confirmation bias, and the interpretation of familiar practices through pre-existing professional assumptions. Reflexivity was therefore operationalized throughout data documentation and analysis. Descriptions of institutional processes were distinguished from their subsequent theoretical interpretation, while provisional interpretations derived from reflective practitioner narratives were compared with administrative records, school documentation, infrastructural evidence, and policy texts. During the iterative analysis, coding decisions were revisited to assess whether identified patterns were supported across different sources rather than primarily reflecting the researcher's prior expectations. Systematic documentation maintained a traceable connection between source materials, initial codes, broader themes, and final interpretations. These procedures could not eliminate the influence of the insider position, but they made that influence visible and strengthened the transparency, credibility, and critical distance of the analysis (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Tracy, 2020).

The analysis drew on evidence produced or applicable during the [insert academic year or data-collection period]. Four school-level sources were included: documentation of inclusive practices and activities; administrative records concerning staff allocation and personnel continuity; records and descriptions of infrastructural conditions affecting accessibility and participation; and reflective practitioner narratives concerning policy enactment, professional coordination, and everyday problem solving. Materials were included when they provided direct evidence concerning at least one of the study's analytical domains: staffing continuity, accessibility, accountability and evaluation, socioeconomic pressures, or school-level responses to these conditions. Routine administrative materials unrelated to these domains and records containing identifiable information about individual students, families, or staff were excluded. Publicly available policy documents, national regulatory frameworks, and institutional guidelines that were in force during, or directly relevant to, the period examined were also included to situate school-level evidence within the wider Greek policy environment.

Each source served a distinct analytical function. Reflective narratives documented the practitioner-researcher's interpretation of institutional processes; administrative and school records provided evidence of staffing, organization, and continuity; infrastructural records documented material conditions; and policy texts established the formal expectations against which school practices were examined. During analysis, patterns identified in one source were compared with evidence from the other sources to identify convergence, complementarity, or divergence. Themes were retained when they were supported by a coherent combination of evidence rather than by a single isolated account. This systematic comparison operationalized methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the analysis (Tracy, 2020).

The data were examined through an iterative thematic analysis informed by policy-enactment theory and critical approaches to inclusion. First, all materials were read repeatedly to establish familiarity with the case and identify recurring institutional

processes, constraints, and school-level responses. Second, open coding was applied across the evidence sources. A working coding framework was maintained in which each code was defined and linked to illustrative evidence. As code definitions were refined, previously examined materials were revisited to ensure that the revised definitions were applied consistently throughout the dataset.

Third, related codes were compared and grouped according to the institutional mechanism they represented. Codes concerning staff turnover, delayed appointments, and disrupted professional coordination were grouped under personnel instability. Codes concerning inaccessible spaces, activity relocation, and temporary physical adjustments formed the theme of infrastructure and accessibility limitations. Codes concerning policy interpretation, evaluation expectations, and uncertainty over professional responsibilities were grouped under ambiguity in accountability and evaluation. Codes concerning family participation, resource disparities, and school–family communication formed the theme of socioeconomic pressures. Candidate themes were reviewed against the complete evidence base and across the different source types to assess their internal coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research question. Some codes were relevant to more than one theme because the structural constraints interacted in practice. For example, relocating an activity primarily reflected an infrastructural barrier but also required additional staff coordination, while difficulties in school–family communication reflected socioeconomic pressures but simultaneously increased teachers' workload. In such cases, codes were assigned to the theme representing the principal institutional mechanism, while their connections with other themes were retained during interpretation. The four-theme structure was maintained because each theme identified a distinct source of constraint, personnel, infrastructure, accountability, or socioeconomic conditions, without implying that these conditions operated independently. The themes should therefore be understood as analytically distinct but empirically interconnected dimensions of inclusive policy enactment.

Because the analysis was conducted by a single practitioner-researcher, formal inter-coder agreement was not applicable. Analytical dependability was instead supported through repeated coding, systematic documentation of coding decisions, comparison across evidence sources, and reflexive examination of interpretations that might have been influenced by the researcher's insider position. The final four themes were interpreted in relation to the interaction among policy expectations, structural conditions, accountability arrangements, and local agency. Constraints were analyzed as institutional and systemic dynamics rather than attributed solely to individual educators or families.

The unit of analysis was the school as an organization rather than individual students, families, or staff. The study did not involve interviews, questionnaires, experimental interventions, participant recruitment, or the collection of identifiable personal information. Institutional records and practitioner accounts were examined only in anonymized and aggregated form, and no actions, statements, or characteristics were attributed to identifiable individuals. Because no individuals were recruited as research participants and no personal data were collected, procedures concerning individual informed consent, voluntary participation, and withdrawal were not applicable to the evidence analyzed. Under the applicable institutional regulations, this form of

organizational practitioner inquiry did not require formal ethical approval. Electronic materials were maintained in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher, and all analytical extracts were anonymized and contained no identifying information. Confidentiality, professional integrity, and respect for the school community were maintained throughout the research process.

As a context-specific single-case study, the research does not support statistical generalization. Its purpose is analytical transferability: to provide a theoretically informed account that readers may assess in relation to comparable educational settings. The practitioner-researcher role provided continuity and contextual depth but also introduced the possibility of interpretive bias; systematic documentation, triangulation, and reflexive analysis were used to address this limitation. The findings should therefore be understood as an exploratory account of policy practice dynamics within one Greek primary school rather than as representative of all schools in the national system.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personnel instability disrupted the continuity of inclusive provision by weakening collaborative planning, institutional memory, and coordination between general and special education teachers. Delayed appointments and staff turnover required incoming teachers to relearn established differentiation strategies, support arrangements, and professional responsibilities, particularly in parallel support, where a special education teacher assists an individual student within a mainstream classroom. Consequently, previously established collaborative practices had to be repeatedly reconstructed, delaying consistent support for students with diverse learning needs (Giavrimis, 2024; Papadimitriou & Koutsoklenis, 2023). This finding underscores the importance of sustained professional collaboration, shared responsibility, and organizational continuity in inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020).

These experiences illustrate how staffing stability functions as a structural condition that supports the development of inclusive school cultures. In contexts where inclusive initiatives depend largely on school-level coordination and professional collaboration, repeated personnel turnover can interrupt the institutional memory required to sustain inclusive practices over time (Norwich, 2022). Physical infrastructure and accessibility formed a second major constraint on the implementation of inclusive practices. Certain areas of the school building, particularly spaces located on different floors, were not fully accessible to students with mobility-related needs. When an educational activity was scheduled in an inaccessible space, teachers and other staff had to reorganize classroom arrangements or relocate the activity to another part of the building. Participation therefore depended on the availability of suitable rooms, sufficient personnel, and flexible scheduling rather than on permanent accessibility provisions. These adjustments enabled students to participate in particular activities, but they did not provide consistent or independent access to the full educational environment. A systematically accessible school would provide permanent step-free access to teaching and support spaces, appropriate circulation routes, and accessible facilities so that participation would not require the

relocation of activities or additional staff intervention. In the absence of such provisions, responsibility for overcoming architectural barriers shifted to teachers and school staff, who had to devise temporary solutions. The case therefore demonstrates that ad hoc adaptations can mitigate immediate exclusion but cannot substitute for infrastructure designed to guarantee equitable and continuous participation.

These experiences demonstrate how material and architectural conditions establish practical boundaries around inclusion. Despite formal commitments to inclusive education, the absence of fully accessible infrastructure limited the extent to which participation could be consistently guaranteed for all students. Physical accessibility therefore functioned as a structural condition that directly shaped the realization of inclusion in everyday school life (Ainscow, 2020).

Ambiguity surrounding accountability and evaluation constituted a related structural constraint. The evidence revealed tension between the flexible, context-responsive work required for inclusion and evaluation expectations emphasizing standardized and readily measurable outcomes. For example, inclusive provision at the school frequently required flexible scheduling, the relocation of activities, repeated staff coordination, and the rebuilding of collaborative routines following personnel changes. Although these actions were essential for maintaining participation, their relational and organizational value was not easily represented through standardized indicators of performance. This created uncertainty about how such work would be recognized within professional evaluation and made experimentation with time-intensive inclusive practices more difficult to sustain. This pattern parallels findings from other European contexts, not because their accountability systems are identical to the Greek framework, but because standardization can similarly make adaptive and relational work less visible and encourage professional risk aversion (Ball, 2017; Paulsrud, 2024).

Socioeconomic pressures affecting school–family relationships constituted a fourth constraint on the continuity of inclusive practice. Families differed in the time, material resources, and opportunities available to maintain regular communication with the school, particularly when they were also managing additional educational or psychosocial demands (Vlachou *et al.*, 2023). One recurring pattern concerned difficulties in sustaining coordinated support when caregivers could not participate consistently in scheduled meetings or respond regularly to school communications. In such cases, teachers had to repeat information, adapt communication arrangements, and clarify responsibilities to maintain continuity between school-based support and the student's wider circumstances. These responses helped preserve communication, but they also required additional staff time and depended on the availability and initiative of individual educators.

The finding should not be interpreted as attributing responsibility to families. Instead, it demonstrates how unequal socioeconomic circumstances affected families' opportunities to participate in school processes and increased the compensatory responsibilities assumed by the school. Strong school–family partnerships supported inclusion when they could be maintained, but unequal access to time, resources, and external services made participation less consistent. The case therefore supports the argument that inclusive education is shaped by social inequalities extending beyond the

school and that educational institutions are frequently expected to address their consequences without sufficient systemic or interagency support (Murillo-Jiménez *et al.*, 2025; Slee, 2018). The four principal structural constraints identified in the case, together with their practical manifestations and implications for inclusive provision, are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Structural constraints affecting inclusive education

| Structural constraint | Empirical manifestation | Immediate consequence | Implication for inclusion |
|---|---|---|---|
| Personnel instability | Delayed appointments and changes in special education personnel | Disrupted collaboration and repeated induction of incoming staff | Reduced continuity of inclusive provision |
| Physical inaccessibility | Some school spaces on different floors were inaccessible to students with mobility-related needs | Activities had to be relocated or reorganized | Participation depended on temporary arrangements |
| Accountability ambiguity | Relational and adaptive work was difficult to represent through standardized indicators | Uncertainty about the recognition of inclusive professional work | Context-responsive practices risked becoming less visible |
| Socioeconomic pressures | Unequal opportunities for families to participate consistently in school communication | Additional coordination and communication work for teachers | Continuity of support depended partly on available family resources and school capacity |

The findings demonstrate how the school managed the gap between policy expectations and local conditions through specific adaptive strategies. When personnel changed, existing staff introduced incoming teachers to established practices and rebuilt collaborative planning routines. When physical spaces were inaccessible, activities were relocated or reorganized to enable participation. When socioeconomic pressures disrupted school–family communication, teachers adapted communication arrangements and assumed additional coordination responsibilities. These responses enabled inclusive practices to continue under difficult conditions, but they remained temporary and dependent on available personnel, flexible scheduling, and professional commitment.

The school's adaptive capacity therefore represented both a form of professional agency and evidence of structural fragility. Local problem solving mitigated the immediate effects of staffing instability, inaccessible infrastructure, accountability ambiguity, and unequal family resources, but it did not remove the underlying conditions producing those difficulties. From a policy-enactment perspective, the case demonstrates that inclusion is shaped through the interpretation of policy within particular material and organizational circumstances rather than through the straightforward fulfillment of formal objectives (Ball *et al.*, 2012). Inclusive education consequently emerged as a contingent process: school-level agency could sustain participation temporarily, but its continuity and equity ultimately depended on stable and coordinated systemic support. Table 2 synthesizes the adaptive strategies through which the school responded to these constraints and highlights

the limitations of relying on temporary, school-level solutions in the absence of sustained systemic support.

**Table 2.** School level adaptive strategies and their limitations

| Structural challenge | Adaptive strategy | Immediate benefit | Limitation | Systemic requirement |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Personnel instability | Informal induction, documentation sharing, and renewed collaborative planning | Helped maintain existing support arrangements | Required repeated effort and could not guarantee continuity | Timely appointments and personnel stability |
| Inaccessible infrastructure | Relocating activities and reorganizing classroom arrangements | Enabled participation in specific activities | Did not ensure permanent or independent access | Accessible school buildings and facilities |
| Accountability ambiguity | Professional judgment and context-responsive adjustments | Allowed educators to respond to changing needs | Adaptive work could remain insufficiently visible in evaluation | Evaluation frameworks recognizing collaborative and relational work |
| Socioeconomic pressures | Rescheduling meetings, adapting communication, and repeating information | Helped maintain school–family coordination | Increased staff workload and depended on available capacity | Accessible family engagement and coordinated external support |

This study examined inclusive education as enacted within the structural and policy constraints of a Greek public primary school, highlighting the interaction between inclusive policy objectives and the material, organizational, and socio-political conditions that shape everyday educational practice. Interpreted through the lens of policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012), the findings illustrate how inclusive policies are not implemented in a uniform or linear manner but are translated and negotiated by educational actors within specific institutional contexts.

Interpreted through a critical-inclusion perspective, the case demonstrates that exclusion was produced not only through individual attitudes or pedagogical choices but also through institutional and material conditions (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018). Staffing discontinuities disrupted collaborative routines, inaccessible spaces restricted participation, ambiguous accountability arrangements made adaptive work less visible, and socioeconomic inequalities increased the compensatory responsibilities assumed by the school. These constraints interacted with one another and transferred responsibility for sustaining inclusion from the education system to individual educators and school-level problem solving.

Inclusive education in centralized public systems depends on the alignment between policy expectations and schools' capacity to enact them. Sustainable provision requires stable staffing, accessible infrastructure, clearly defined coordination responsibilities, and evaluation frameworks that recognize collaborative and context-responsive work

(Ainscow, 2020; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). In this case, personnel instability amplified other structural constraints by disrupting institutional memory and weakening the coordination needed to address inaccessible spaces and ambiguous accountability arrangements. These interactions illustrate how policy enactment is shaped by organizational resources, professional agency, and institutional conditions rather than policy objectives alone (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Braun *et al.*, 2011; Paulsrud, 2024). The findings therefore offer analytically transferable insights for comparable settings, not statistically representative conclusions about all Greek primary schools.

This interaction highlights relational continuity and collective learning as structural requirements for inclusion (Kenny *et al.*, 2023). Staff stability enables local adaptations to become shared institutional practices, whereas turnover disrupts continuity and forces repeated reconstruction. From a policy-enactment perspective, staffing instability thus undermined the school's capacity to address infrastructural and governance constraints, leaving inclusive provision improvised and vulnerable rather than institutionally sustainable (Ball *et al.*, 2012). These constraints also interacted to intensify organizational demands on inclusive practice, as summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Interactions among structural constraints in inclusive practice

| Interaction | Mechanism linking the constraints | Consequence for school-level practice |
|---|---|---|
| Personnel instability and physical inaccessibility | Changes in personnel disrupted shared knowledge needed to coordinate alternative arrangements for inaccessible spaces | Accessibility solutions had to be repeatedly explained and reorganized |
| Personnel instability and accountability ambiguity | Collaborative and adaptive work had to be re-established while its professional value remained difficult to capture through standardized evaluation | Sustaining inclusive routines required repeated individual effort |
| Socioeconomic pressures and personnel instability | Additional communication and coordination demands competed with staff time already affected by personnel changes | Less organizational capacity was available for collaborative planning |
| Physical inaccessibility and socioeconomic pressures | Participation required flexible arrangements, while family circumstances could complicate coordination between school and home | Continuity of support depended on multiple forms of local coordination |
| Accountability ambiguity and adaptive practice | Context-specific responses produced relational outcomes that were not always immediately measurable | The institutional contribution of inclusive work risked being underestimated |
| Interaction among all four constraints | Temporary adaptations compensated for limitations in staffing, infrastructure, governance, and external support | Inclusion remained vulnerable to staff availability and local circumstances |

Material and infrastructural barriers restricted inclusive participation, exposing the gap between formal commitments and the physical accessibility of school environments

(Ackah-Jnr & Danso, 2019; Sunardi *et al.*, 2024). Teachers responded by relocating activities and reorganizing spaces, but these temporary adjustments risked normalizing systemic deficiencies and shifting responsibility for accessibility from education authorities to school staff. Accountability presented a related challenge: collaborative planning, family communication, and context-sensitive adaptations required substantial professional judgment but were not always easily captured by standardized evaluation measures. Research on inclusive education accountability highlights the importance of clarifying institutional responsibilities and aligning evaluation with the collaborative demands of inclusive practice (Kuyini, 2025; Tolo & Hagatun, 2026). Thus, local flexibility helped sustain participation in the short term but could not replace accessible infrastructure, clearly defined institutional responsibilities, or accountability arrangements responsive to the complexity of inclusion (Fathinnaufal & Pamungkas, 2025; Warnes *et al.*, 2022).

The Greek case does not establish that its accountability framework is identical to those examined in other European contexts. Nevertheless, it reflects the same underlying mechanism identified by Ball (2017) and Paulsrud (2024): when professional value is primarily demonstrated through standardized outputs, adaptive and relational work may become institutionally less visible. This can weaken the organizational incentive to invest in time-intensive inclusive practices even when they are educationally necessary. Evaluation frameworks should therefore recognize professional collaboration, context-responsive adaptation, and sustained participation alongside readily quantifiable outcomes.

The case illustrates how socioeconomic disadvantage can constrain school family communication and participation, requiring teachers to devote additional time to coordinating support and compensating for limited family resources. Research in China similarly shows that socioeconomic status shapes parental involvement, teacher parent communication, and children's educational outcomes (Gu *et al.*, 2024; Xia, 2024; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Longitudinal evidence further links family socioeconomic status to academic achievement through parental involvement and student engagement (Chen *et al.*, 2024), while research on Chinese families of children with autism highlights the challenges parents encounter when advocating for inclusive education (Zhang *et al.*, 2022). These findings reinforce the interpretation that difficulties in school family engagement should not automatically be attributed to inadequate parental commitment. Rather, when external social and psychosocial support is insufficient, schools may assume additional responsibilities without corresponding resources, intensifying existing organizational constraints (Murillo-Jiménez *et al.*, 2025).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that inclusive education became contingent when the conditions required for its implementation were not systemically guaranteed. The school's adaptive strategies sustained participation in particular circumstances, but their dependence on professional goodwill meant that a formally recognized educational right operated in practice as an uneven and locally negotiated opportunity. This pattern is consistent with policy-enactment research showing that formal policy objectives are interpreted and transformed through the material, organizational, and professional conditions of individual schools (Ball *et al.*, 2012).

This distinction is central to the study's argument: professional and school-level agency should enrich inclusive provision, not compensate for delayed staffing, inaccessible infrastructure, unclear accountability arrangements, or insufficient external support. Research similarly indicates that sustainable inclusion depends on institutional capacity, personnel continuity, accessible environments, and coordinated systemic provision rather than isolated local initiatives (Ainscow, 2020; Kenny *et al.*, 2023; Norwich, 2022). Without these guarantees, inclusive education remains vulnerable to local circumstances and exceptional individual effort rather than functioning as an enforceable and permanent feature of public schooling (Slee, 2018).

This study contributes to critical inclusion and policy-enactment scholarship by demonstrating how staffing instability, inaccessible infrastructure, accountability ambiguity, and socioeconomic pressures interact to make educational rights conditional in everyday school life, shifting responsibility from the education system to individual schools and educators. Policy implementation is shaped by institutional contexts and material conditions (Braun *et al.*, 2011), while inclusive pedagogy requires teaching practices that support all learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Beaton, 2018). Sustainable inclusion also depends on recognizing diverse perspectives (Messiou, 2017), coordinated leadership and system-level support (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020; Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2024), and adequate institutional capacity. Recent Greek case-based research similarly highlights the role of inclusive leadership in fostering collaboration while remaining dependent on institutional support (Tsiouri, 2026b). Thus, professional commitment alone cannot overcome structural constraints; sustainable inclusion requires the organizational and material resources necessary to translate policy commitments into practice (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Slee, 2018).

The findings point to several areas requiring systemic reform, including timely and stable appointments of special education personnel, adequately funded accessibility standards, clearly defined coordination responsibilities, and evaluation frameworks that recognize collaborative and context-responsive professional work (Ainscow, 2020; Ball, 2017; Kenny *et al.*, 2023). Empirical studies in Greece demonstrate that school leaders' knowledge, beliefs, and professional practices influence the implementation of inclusive education, highlighting the need for sustained leadership development and institutional support (Kokkonidou *et al.*, 2024; Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2025). Research on inclusive school leadership further shows how collaborative practices can promote participation and equality, while accountability research emphasizes the importance of recognizing the contributions of different professionals in supporting students with special educational needs (Foykas, 2024; Tolo & Hagatun, 2026). Such reforms would reduce schools' dependence on temporary adjustments and individual goodwill. Sustainable inclusive education therefore requires coordinated action addressing organizational capacity, physical accessibility, professional collaboration, and institutional accountability. The findings further suggest that inclusive practices become sustainable only when professional agency is supported by adequate resources, stable institutional arrangements, and clearly allocated responsibilities. Without these conditions, local adaptations may

alleviate immediate barriers while allowing underlying inequalities to persist. Table 4 outlines the corresponding systemic implications.

**Table 4.** Systemic implications for sustainable inclusive education

| Identified finding | Required systemic response | Responsible level | Expected contribution to sustainable inclusion |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discontinuity in special education personnel | Establish timely appointments and improve continuity of staffing | Education authorities and school administration | More stable collaboration and institutional memory |
| Inaccessible school spaces | Provide funded accessibility improvements and enforce accessibility standards | Education authorities and relevant infrastructure bodies | More equitable and independent participation |
| Limited recognition of adaptive professional work | Include collaboration, contextual adaptation, and sustained participation in evaluation framework | Education authorities and evaluation bodies | Better recognition of the professional work required for inclusion |
| Unequal opportunities for family participation | Provide flexible communication arrangements and strengthen links with relevant social and psychosocial services | Education authorities and evaluation bodies | Better recognition of the professional work required for inclusion |
| Dependence on individual goodwill | Institutionalize effective inclusive routines and allocate appropriate staff time and resources | Schools and interagency support services | More consistent coordination between school and family |

Because the study examined a single practitioner-researched school, its findings cannot be treated as representative of all Greek primary schools. Future research should examine multiple schools across different geographical and socioeconomic contexts and incorporate the perspectives of teachers, students, families, school leaders, and support professionals. Comparative multi-site research could establish whether the interactions identified here recur across the Greek education system and determine how different staffing, accessibility, and governance arrangements influence the sustainability of inclusive practice. The central implication remains that inclusion should be secured through institutional design and systemic provision rather than left to continuous local negotiation (Norwich, 2022; Slee, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the sustainability of inclusive education depends not only on policy commitments and educators' professional agency but also on the institutional capacity to translate these commitments into consistent practice. The findings reveal how personnel instability, inaccessible infrastructure, ambiguous accountability arrangements, and socioeconomic pressures interact to constrain inclusive provision and transfer responsibility for addressing systemic shortcomings to individual schools and

educators. The study's principal contribution lies in demonstrating the dual role of school-level adaptation: although professional initiative and organizational flexibility sustain participation under challenging circumstances, reliance on temporary adjustments may also conceal persistent structural deficiencies. From a policy-enactment and critical-inclusion perspective, these findings illustrate how formal policy objectives are mediated by the material, organizational, and professional conditions of everyday school practice (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Slee, 2018). Accordingly, educational authorities should ensure timely and stable appointments of special education personnel, establish funded and enforceable accessibility requirements, clarify coordination responsibilities, and adopt evaluation frameworks that recognize collaboration, context-responsive professional judgment, and equitable student participation. Strengthening coordination between schools and external support services is also essential to ensure that inclusive provision is supported by adequate institutional resources (Ainscow, 2020; Kenny *et al.*, 2023; Norwich, 2022).

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's single-case, practitioner-research design. They are not statistically representative of Greek primary schools but offer analytically transferable insights into how structural conditions shape inclusive practice in comparable educational settings. Future research should examine multiple schools across diverse geographical and socioeconomic contexts and incorporate the perspectives of teachers, students, families, school leaders, and support professionals. Comparative studies could investigate how differences in staffing continuity, physical accessibility, institutional leadership, and accountability arrangements influence the sustainability of inclusive provision. Ultimately, this study argues that inclusive education cannot be secured through professional commitment alone. Although local agency remains essential, it cannot substitute for stable personnel, accessible environments, clearly defined institutional responsibilities, and sustained systemic support. For inclusive education to function as a substantive and equitable educational right, the conditions necessary to realize that right must be embedded in the organization, resourcing, and governance of public education.

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### Author Contributions
Eleftheria Tsiouri contributed to the study and manuscript preparation. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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### Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability Statement
The data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors should disclose any use of generative AI or AI-assisted tools in preparing this manuscript and remain responsible for its content.

## Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

The authors should state whether ethical approval was obtained and informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection.

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