

Children's Voice as a Parameter of Ryan's Model for Promoting Inclusive Education: The Case of Greece

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ABSTRACT

The choice of the appropriate model of educational leadership for the promotion of inclusive education is a key issue for contemporary educational policy. This paper focused on the role of children's participation in democratic school leadership based on the Ryan model in order to promote good inclusive education practices in primary schools. Five school principals from different schools in Athens, Greece, participated in this research. The research showed that involving children in school leadership through a range of activities can enhance the participation of all children in the daily life of the school. This article concludes with a discussion, suggestions and limitations on using student voice as part of school leadership to strengthen inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, inclusive leadership, Ryan's Model, voice of children.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term "student voice" (SV) refers to the participation of school children in decisions concerning their daily life at school (Conner, 2021; Mitra, 2018). SV in their school is an opportunity to engage with issues in their daily lives, thus achieving the maximum possible impact (Hawkins *et al.*, 2009; Jones & Bubb, 2021). Ryan's model is an emancipatory leadership model that aims to implement inclusive education at the school unit level (Ryan *et al.*, 2009). A key parameter of the Ryan model is the voice of the children, i.e., their equal participation in school leadership through their collaboration with all members of the school (Ryan, 2016). Inclusive education is concerned with the participation of all children equally in school, regardless of color, religion, or special educational needs (Amor *et al.*, 2019; Anastasiou *et al.*, 2015). More specifically, when all students are involved in learning and educational activities, equal participation is achieved without exclusion and discrimination (Rizos & Foykas, 2023a, 2023b).

One of the key conditions for promoting inclusive education at the school level is the participation of the school leader and children in school decisions (Ferreira *et al.*, 2020). Research carried out so far has shown the positive role of student's voices in school leadership in promoting democratic, inclusive education (Lyons *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the participation of children in school

leadership seems to enhance inclusive education in many countries (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021; Makoelle, 2020; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). More specifically, research has shown that children can participate in activities that promote cooperation, solidarity and interaction among all children, removing all barriers that hinder these processes (Mavrogordato & White, 2020).

This article focuses on the participation of students in school leadership in order to promote the inclusion of their peers with special educational needs and children from different countries in primary schools in Greece. More specifically, five school leaders from schools in Athens, where children with special educational needs and refugee children were present in their school unit, participated in the research. The school leaders collaborated with children in the school in a series of activities aimed at strengthening relationships between all children and promoting inclusive education. The results of our research showed that the role of SV in inclusive activities to engage all children in school activities seems to have positive effects and enhance the self-confidence of all children in the school. In addition, the research highlighted the importance of democratic, inclusive leadership in the participation of all children in school activities.



The research question posed based on all the above mentioned in this research is as follows: Can children's participation in school leadership enhance inclusive education in Greek schools?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Notes on Basic Leadership Models

School leadership refers to the set of actions and activities implemented by leaders for the purpose of better management of the school (Acton, 2021; Hadebe, 2023; Mbonu & Azuji, 2021). There are three models of school leadership: bureaucratic leadership, transformational leadership and democratic leadership (Purwanto *et al.*, 2020).

In *bureaucratic leadership*, the leader has total control over all the school's teaching processes and the other employees are his subordinates, with no accountability for anything (Chingara & Heystek, 2019). In particular, the leader is essentially the boss of the school and the others are obliged to follow the rules set by him without having the discretion to agree or disagree (Bros & Schechter, 2022).

In *transformational leadership*, the leader has a vision for his school and together with the other teachers in the school, they try to implement it (Kwan, 2020). More specifically, a leader tries to inspire his subordinates and all together try to achieve his goals (Vermeulen *et al.*, 2022). In this model, it is the school leader's commitment that inspires the respect of all his colleagues and motivates them to achieve the school's goals without demanding it in a strict way (Leithwood *et al.*, 2002).

Democratic leadership refers to the participation of all school members (teachers, pupils, local community, etc.) in school leadership, with the aim of making joint decisions on school issues (Or & Berkovich, 2023). Democratic leadership is a new form of leadership that aims to promote cooperation and solidarity among all school stakeholders (Liggett, 2022). In this model, the vs. play an important role in the exercise of leadership since all members of the school unit have leadership responsibilities (Coffey & Lavery, 2018).

2.2. The Use of the Ryan's Model

Ryan's model is quite practical for promoting inclusion, and it has been applied in foreign countries and has produced positive results (Ryan, 2006). Therefore, this model essentially aims to empower teachers, students and the community around the school unit (Ryan, 2016). According to Ryan's model, inclusive leadership should have characteristics of empowerment leadership, teacher leadership, child leadership and local community involvement (Ryan, 2007). In this context, it seems necessary to empower teachers and students in the school unit in question so that they can participate in an active way in the management of the school unit (Ryan *et al.*, 2009). According to Ryan (2007), the management of the school unit should aim at the following:

- a) Achieving a holistic yet collective view of inclusion,

- b) Activating the policy of inclusion not only in the school but also in the local community,
- c) Putting the practical and theoretical knowledge and attitudes of teachers to the test,
- d) Provoking dialogue on the cultivation and formation of an inclusive culture within the school.

Ryan's model takes into account the SV as a parameter of leadership since it is through the children that truly inclusive leadership can be exercised (Ryan, 2006). More specifically, children are involved in processes with the help of teachers and school leaders to promote inclusive education (Facca *et al.*, 2020). In addition, they exercise leadership in the school context in a critical way, as they are more aware of the needs, concerns and wants of their peers and try to solve them in the best possible way (Carnevale, 2020). Through this aspect of the Ryan model, children have the opportunity to exercise control over the behavior of their peers belonging to marginalized groups or with special educational needs in the school and, by extension, in the local community (Wall *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, cooperative relationships are developed between all children in an equal way, and children can show trust and solidarity and develop friendly relationships (Spencer *et al.*, 2020).

This model of inclusive leadership has been successfully implemented in countries abroad. Initially, the research by Sider *et al.* (2021) conducted with 285 principals from six provinces in Canada highlighted key difficulties in implementing inclusion, but the implementation of practices derived from Ryan's model also promotes the shared acceptance of all children in the inclusive school.

A study by Gómez-Hurtado *et al.* (2021) showed that this model has been successfully implemented in school units in Chile and Spain. In particular, the inclusion of migrant children in the schools of the two countries was the result of the implementation of good practices of this model. In addition, practices of Ryan's inclusive leadership model have been successfully implemented in schools in Ireland.

Research by Brown *et al.* (2019) distributed leadership, along with the use of good practices of Ryan's model, promotes equity and social justice within the school settings implemented. According to Forde *et al.* (2021), inclusive leadership in school settings has been successfully implemented in US states such as Canada and has resulted in positive effects on behavioral education.

2.3. About Inclusive Leadership

Research on inclusive leadership at the international level is scarce. Shore and Chung (2022) showed that inclusive leaders can help integrate children from marginalized groups into the school. Another research by Ashikali *et al.* (2021) showed that inclusive leadership from all school members is required to achieve school goals. Roberson and Perry (2022) implemented a study involving 27 school leaders, which showed that it is important for leaders to take into account the opinions of other school members to direct inclusive leadership.

Another study by Jolly and Lee (2021) showed that there should be incentives and rewards for inclusive school leaders to allow their subordinates to express their opinions

on school events. [Van Knippenberg and van Ginkel \(2022\)](#) showed that group leadership that can be implemented by the inclusive leader can enhance the inclusion of all children in learning instruction. Furthermore, a study by [Mor Barak et al. \(2022\)](#) showed that the inclusive leader should take into account the specific identities of the groups in the school and, based on these, organize inclusive policies that integrate these groups into the school context.

There are few studies related to inclusive leadership in Greek schools. A study from [Chandolia and Anas-tasiou \(2020\)](#), which took place in primary schools in Epirus, showed that transformational leadership tends to settle conflicts between students and promote inclusion. In a study by [Karagianni and Montgomery \(2018\)](#), implemented in schools in Thessaloniki, it was shown that inclusive education is viewed positively by school principals, especially those with training in special education. However, neither this study nor the present study mentioned any specific leadership style followed by the participating principals to promote inclusion.

A study by [Gotsis and Grimani \(2017\)](#) showed that the role of the leader in primary schools in Greece is important for the promotion of inclusive education. In addition, [Antonopoulou et al. \(2019\)](#) showed that an

effective democratic leadership model promotes inclusive education through the interaction of all children with each other and their participation in inclusive activities.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

3.1. The Inclusive Intervention

In January 2024, five visits to five Greek primary school principals were carried out in order to implement the discussion on children’s participation in school leadership. All participants reported that they do not give a role to children in terms of school leadership, while it was crucial for all of them to implement inclusive education in their school context. Then, school leaders were asked to implement this practice and, from the next day onwards, to define the role of children in leadership. All participants agreed to have a visit after one month to discuss the effects this practice has had on the school’s inclusive policy.

After one month, a visit was made to the school units of the school leaders where the intervention was implemented. Through short interviews (5–10 minutes) with the participants, due to the heavy workload, the positive impact of the children’s participation on the daily life of

TABLE I: Q1. DID CHILDREN’S VOICES AS PART OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PROMOTE THEIR COOPERATION AND ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY?

Interviews extracts	Codes
<i>Panos:</i> Yes, of course! I can say that the children, with my subtle participation, were able to organize an excellent food activity, which promoted cooperation between all the children. Therefore, the VC plays an important role in the effect of inclusive education. Furthermore, members of the local community participated in this event and were enthusiastic about the children’s efforts.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Hermes:</i> It was a new experience for me. I worked perfectly with all the team members, and we all wrote the article together. The topic of the article was thought up by the students themselves. The children with Asperger’s participated equally in the process and worked harmoniously with their classmates.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B).
<i>Georgia:</i> The truth is that I didn’t know much about inclusive education. When I participated with the children in my group in the creation of the poster, I understood the benefits for all the children since the cooperation between all the students was fostered, and their interest was immediate. In addition, members of the local community were also impressed by the poster.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Ioanna:</i> It was a process I hadn’t thought of until today! The children participated enthusiastically in the festival, and after a discussion we had together, we decided to organize this event. The children cooperated with each other to a satisfactory degree, promoting inclusive education in practice. In addition, the mayor was instrumental in the implementation of the festival. The teachers, parents and other members of the local community were particularly enthusiastic about the outcome.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Thanos:</i> It was an excellent experience for me and for the children who participated. More specifically, together with the children, we decided on the theme of the event. We talked with the students and members of the local community about the event, and the result was impressive. All the children worked together in harmony, and solidarity developed between them.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).

the school and on the behaviour of children from other countries and children with special educational needs was evident. More specifically, school leaders organized activities with the help of children that promoted inclusive education and involved all children in the school unit in an equal way, promoting mutual respect and cooperation.

In addition, the participants reported that the children showed particular interest in their role. They developed mixed cooperation groups on their own initiative in the implementation of actions. More specifically, *the leader of the first school* told us that together with the children of his school and with local community leaders, they organized an exhibition of local food from children of Syrian origin in their school. This idea came from the students, who formed a mixed group with the participation of two Syrian children attending the school. With the help of the school leader and the local community, they implemented this exhibition. All the children worked together and made the food presented in the exhibition, with the discretionary supervision of the headmaster.

The school leader of the second school, together with a mixed eight-member group of children, produced an article in the school newspaper, which was distributed to all members of the school and their families. The article was about the special skills of a child with Asperger's and his aptitude for mathematics. Three of the members of the mixed group were a student with Asperger's and were particularly involved in writing the article with their classmates and with the help of the school leader. The children with Asperger's Syndrome developed relatively good relationships with their peers and discussed the topic of the article. Of course, the difficulties faced by children in the autism spectrum in terms of communication skills do not allow them to cultivate strong friendships. However, they have developed a degree of dialogue with the other members of their group and the school leader.

In the third school, the school leader, together with a six-member group of children, made a poster showing the school's football team with different colors on each t-shirt. The leader explained to all the members of the team, which included children from Albania, Nigeria and Roma children, that everyone can cooperate as they do during a game. All the children showed particular interest and presented this poster at an event that took place on the school grounds, with the participation of all the school members and local community members.

The fourth participant in our research implemented a music festival with the participation of a five-member group of children, which included two children with mobility difficulties who knew how to play the guitar. The festival was organized with the help of the mayor of the city, and the participation was high. All the children, with the help of the teaching staff and the school leader, presented a creative performance, and the cooperation between all the members was excellent.

The last leader, with the help of a group of ten children, organized a landscape photography festival, which was held in the school hall. More specifically, the group included three members from Pakistan and two children with dyslexia who were particularly interested in photography. The children cooperated harmoniously with each

other and presented together photographs of Greek and foreign landscapes, including Pakistan.

3.2. *The Identity of the Participating Schools*

The primary schools where the intervention was implemented are all in Athens. *The first school* is an intercultural school with 245 children, and it accommodates children from Syria. These students attend the general class and sometimes attend a special class where they are taught the Greek language, with the aim of their gradual inclusion in the school context. Most schoolchildren do not include these children in their groups because they do not know their language well.

The second school is a general school consisting of 256 children. There are also students with special educational needs and, in particular, three children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. The children with this syndrome attend classes in the classroom with the other children with the help of a parallel teacher. At break time, these children are isolated and socialize with the parallel support teacher who is with them during the lesson.

Regarding the third school where our intervention was implemented, it consisted of 182 children and was an intercultural school. More specifically, the school was attended by children of Nigerian origin, Roma children, and Albanian children. In this case, the children also attended general classroom lessons, and for some hours of the day, they attended Greek lessons in a special classroom. The children had developed friendships with some of their classmates, and with some others, they did not speak at all.

As for the fourth school, it was a general school consisting of 320 children. There were children who had been diagnosed with dyslexia and were attending the general class. The school had an integration class, where the children attended classes for some hours of the day. The children have developed friendships with some of the children from the school, and there are children who make fun of them for struggling with their studies.

The last school where the intervention was implemented was a school with 400 students. This school was attended by children from Pakistan, who attended classes in the general classroom with the other children in the school. However, some hours of the day, they attended Greek classes in a specially designed classroom. These children had no company during break time, and some children from the school even made fun of them for their origins.

3.3. *The Participating School Leaders*

In this section, reference will be made to the profile of the research participants. More specifically, (we have used pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity):

- *Panos* was 43 years old, and it was his fourth year as a leader. He had a master's degree in school leadership and was trying to get his school involved in inclusive activities.
- *Hermes* was 62 years old, and it was his twelfth year as a leader. He did not have a master's degree in school leadership but had attended school leadership seminars. He did not have any consistent inclusive practices.

TABLE II: Q2. COULD THE INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES THAT CHILDREN PARTICIPATED IN AS PART OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STRENGTHEN CHILDREN’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH ALL MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY?

Interviews extracts	Codes
<i>Panos:</i> Definitely yes! The activities implemented by the children were the occasion to strengthen the children’s relationships with themselves, with the other members of the school and the local community, thus achieving inclusive education.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Hermes:</i> It was an interesting activity that helped to foster a climate of cooperation between all members of the school community and the local community. This inclusive activity, with the participation of the children, strengthened inclusive education.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Georgia:</i> As a school leader, I didn’t know much about inclusive education activities. However, through this activity, I observed the cultivation of a climate of cooperation among all the children in the school without exclusions and discrimination.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Ioanna:</i> It’s a process that I’m sure I’m going to start from now on. Cultivating a climate of solidarity, involving children in joint activities and involving members of the local community promote inclusive education.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).
<i>Thanos:</i> The participation of the children and mine in inclusive activities certainly promotes cooperation between all stakeholders of the school unit children’s solidarity and promotes inclusive education in a practical way.	The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children (A). The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership (B). Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community (C).

TABLE III: SUBJECTS AREAS

Codes	Symbols
The positive impact of CV in fostering cooperation and solidarity among all children	A
The promotion of inclusive education through children’s participation in leadership	B
Inclusive leadership strengthens the relationships between all members of the school and the local community	C

- *Georgia* was 59 years old, and it was his second year as a leader. She did not have a master’s degree in school leadership and had not attended any specialized seminars in school leadership. Also, she did not know much about inclusive education.
- *Ioanna* was 46 years old, and it was her fourth year as a leader. She had a master’s degree in school leadership and had attended several seminars on school leadership. She also had a background in inclusive leadership techniques.
- *Thanos* was 51 years old, and it was his eighth year as a leader. He had a master’s degree in school leadership, which strongly supported inclusive education but, in practice, did not support it.

4. FINDINGS

Basic data of the research were drawn from two open-ended questions, which school leaders answered orally due to a lack of time and the obligations of the participants. In addition, the questions were incorporated as part of a semi-structured interview (Knott et al., 2022). The method chosen to analyze the data was content analysis. (Abreu et al., 2022). More specifically, we applied an initial coding of the data obtained from the interviews with school leaders.

The two questions were as follows:

Q1. Did children’s voices as part of school leadership promote their cooperation and acceptance of diversity? (see Table I)

Q2. Could the inclusive activities that children participated in as part of school leadership strengthen children’s relationships with all members of the school community? (see Table II)

Table III refers to the coding implemented to organize the data.

From the analysis of the data that emerged, it is clear that school leaders believe that SV, as part of school leadership, can promote inclusive education. More specifically, through the semi-structured interviews with the children, it is evident that the inclusive activities chosen by the children themselves, with the help of the school leader, foster collaboration among all children in the school, between the educational community and the local community. Furthermore, it is evident that the school leaders who participated

in the survey do not practice a specific model of inclusive leadership and are not aware of the importance of the SV in promoting inclusive education as a factor in Ryan's inclusive model.

Children's participation in school leadership seems to have positive effects both on the promotion of moral education and on the development of children's interpersonal skills. As mentioned by the school leaders, the children, through collaboration, agreed on the type of events to implement with the subtle involvement of the school leader, who appears to have had a supportive role. In addition, they also cooperated perfectly with members of the local community and showed solidarity with each other, as no one was excluded from the process. Therefore, the SV seem to promote inclusive education and remove discrimination and stereotypes.

5. DISCUSSION

Inclusive education is a model of education that is applied in a large number of countries worldwide. Inclusive education is an education that eliminates stereotypes and prejudices. Ryan's inclusive leadership model is a model that has been successfully applied in foreign countries. A key factor in this model is the SV, which fosters cooperation between children and members of the school and local community. However, in Greece, there is no specific model for promoting inclusive education followed by school leaders. Furthermore, school leaders do not take into account the SV in their leadership policy. This research aims to fill this gap.

The research that was implemented aimed to investigate the impact of SV as part of school leadership on the promotion of school leadership. The research revealed the following advantages:

- 1) Cooperation between all children, without discrimination and exclusion.
- 2) Cultivation of solidarity between all members of the school community and the local community.
- 3) Promoting inclusive education through SV.

One of the findings of the research was that SV seems to promote cooperation among all children and involve them in activities. [Mor Barak et al. \(2022\)](#) agree with this. In addition, inclusive education is promoted through SV, and the role of the school leader is critical in engaging all children without exclusion or discrimination, a fact that converges with the literature ([Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020](#); [Roberson & Perry, 2022](#); [Van Knippenberg & van Ginkel, 2022](#)). Also, children's voices can enhance cooperation with their peers if all children choose the activities they will implement with the discretionary help of the school leader ([Facca et al., 2020](#); [Spencer et al., 2020](#); [Wall et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, in Greece, school leaders do not have a coherent model to promote inclusive education, as mentioned in the literature ([Antonopoulou et al., 2019](#); [Gotsis & Grimani, 2017](#)).

However, the research had limitations. The main limitations were the following:

- 1) The lack of knowledge about inclusive education some of the participants had,

- 2) The limited time available to the school leaders due to the workload they had in their school unit.

From the research that was carried out, it is obvious that the research question that was posed had a positive answer. The participation of children in school leadership seems to be able to promote inclusion in Greek schools. More specifically, children's participation in school leadership with the help of the school leader fosters a climate of cooperation among all school stakeholders, without exclusion and discrimination. In addition, all members of the school feel that they can offer and cooperate in order to promote inclusive schooling in the local community.

6. CONCLUSION

The results from the inclusive intervention showed that the VS, as a parameter of Ryan's leadership model, can promote solidarity, cooperation and inclusive policies that should be followed in Greek schools. Furthermore, when school leaders listen to the voices of children, they can promote inclusive education. In Greece, there are school leaders who apply the parameters of Ryan's inclusive model without being aware of it. Therefore, the aspects of Ryan's model can be organized and can constitute a guide to good practice that the school leader can apply in the context of the Greek school. Future research may confirm or reject this conjecture.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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