RESEARCH ARTICLE



How Can the Inclusive School Leader Promote a Democratic Society? The Case of Greek Schools

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ABSTRACT

School is a key factor in promoting democratic citizenship to all children, who are the future citizens of society. This article focuses on the role of the inclusive school leader and the good practices followed to promote equality and democracy for all children in the school. Six primary school principals from Greece, specifically from schools in Athens and Thessaloniki, participated in the research. The results of the survey showed that good practices adopted by inclusive school leaders promote equality and democracy among all children through actions implemented in cooperation with the local community. The article concludes with a discussion, with limitations and suggestions for strengthening the democratic culture of all children in order to promote social inclusion.

Keywords: Democracy, inclusive actions, inclusive education, inclusive leadership.

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1. Introduction

The concept of democracy refers to the participation of all citizens in social activities, the free expression of their opinions, and the acceptance of all citizens irrespective of color, language, or ethnicity (Gorenc, 2022; Latif et al., 2021). Children learn basic democratic principles and values from their attendance at primary school, where school leaders and teachers teach children the value of cooperation and free expression (Sanahuja et al., 2020; Stroetinga et al., 2024). Inclusive education refers to the education of all children in the classroom without restrictions or discrimination on the basis of color, language, religion, etc., (Beyene et al., 2023; Felder, 2021). More specifically, all children in the class are involved in educational activities according to their skills without any child being excluded from the educational process (Rizos & Foykas, 2023a, 2023b). The inclusive leader is the leader who promotes democracy and equality among all members of the school unit and fosters an inclusive and democratic culture (Afzal Tajik & Wali, 2020; López-Roca & Traver-Martí, 2023; Mbua, 2023; Foykas, 2024). In particular, the inclusive leader promotes cooperation among all children and empathy for their peers through democratic actions (Ferguson-Patrick, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2024).

A key condition for promoting a democratic climate at the school level is the role and practices of the inclusive leader (Larsen & Mathé, 2023). The research carried out to date has shown the positive role of the inclusive leader in promoting democracy and equality among children (González-García et al., 2021; Lawrance et al., 2022; Savvopoulos et al., 2024). Furthermore, the participation of children in democratic activities organized by the school leader can strengthen the democratic spirit, equality, and solidarity among all children (Lee, 2024; Lieberkind, 2020). More specifically, research has shown that children who have participated in inclusive activities at school, as adults, think democratically and promote equality (Black-Hawkins et al., 2022; Sales et al., 2021; Stavroussi et al., 2021).

This article focuses on the good practices and actions implemented by inclusive leaders to promote the democratic spirit and the concepts of equality and solidarity in their schools. In particular, six school leaders who are in intercultural schools and schools with children with special educational needs in schools in Athens and Thessaloniki participated in this research. The inclusive school leaders, with the universal participation of all children, implemented a series of inclusive activities to strengthen their democratic behavior, promote equality, and, by extension, a democratic society. The results of the research showed that by mastering basic principles of democratic behavior and applying practices of equality among themselves, children can promote the democratic spirit and the principles of equality in their daily lives. Furthermore, the present research highlighted the importance of inclusive education in promoting a democratic culture through children's participation in inclusive activities.

Based on all the above mentioned in this research, the research question posed is the following: What are the good practices implemented by the inclusive leader in order to promote a democratic climate in the Greek school?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Models of Educational Leadership

The term school leadership refers to the set of actions and practices implemented by the school leader for the purpose of managing the school (Acton, 2021; Hadebe, 2023; Mbonu & Azuji, 2021). The models of leadership used in schools are bureaucratic leadership, transformational leadership, and democratic leadership (Mishra, 2021).

The bureaucratic model of school leadership is the oldest model of school management, and its focus is on the school leader (Rodrigues & Ávila de Lima, 2024). More specifically, the teacher is the boss of the school, imposes his ideas without discussing them with the school members, and does not ask teachers for their opinions on school issues (Dobson & Dobson, 2021).

The transformational model is a leadership model where the school leader wants to implement his or her vision for the school and works with all members of the school unit to achieve it (Leithwood et al., 2020). In particular, the school leader, through discussion and dialogue, inspires the members of the school, and all work together to achieve the goals set (Adams & Velarde, 2021). The leader does not impose the goals and plans he has in an authoritarian way on the school members but listens to all members and tries to convince them in a democratic way to implement his vision (Ordem, 2023).

The democratic model of leadership is a model in which all members of the school participate in the leadership of the school (Caillier, 2020). This model is a new model of leadership that promotes equality and cooperation among all school members in making decisions on school-related issues (Dolph, 2017). In addition, through this model, democracy and equality are promoted, as all members of the school deal with the issues that arise in a critical and democratic way (Leiviskä, 2020).

2.2. Democracy and Social Equity through Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a teaching practice that, by its very nature, promotes the development of a democratic climate and equality among all children (Ginja & Chen, 2023). The acquisition of democratic values by children is an essential part of their education, as it shapes them as active citizens (Sousa & Oxley, 2021). Social justice refers to the equality that develops between children and can shape them as future empathetic and democratic citizens (Makuch & Aczel, 2020). In this context, the role of the leader and, in particular, the inclusive leader is essential in promoting an inclusive climate within the school and in shaping children's personalities (Ke et al., 2022). More specifically, the inclusive leader, through a set of good practices and actions, can involve all children in activities that promote democracy and social equality so that they can acquire an identity of active citizenship (Azorín & Murillo, 2023).

There are a large number of studies at the international level that show the importance of inclusive education for the promotion of democracy and social equality among children. A study by Alam and Mohanty (2023) showed that inclusive education can enhance children's equity in the acquisition of mathematical skills. According to Nilholm (2021), inclusive education promotes equality and democracy at both classroom and school levels. Furthermore, research by Materechera (2020) conducted among primary school teachers showed the importance of inclusive education in the development of democratic principles and equality among all children in an inclusive classroom. Another study by Göransson et al. (2022) showed that teachers agree on the importance of inclusive education, the promotion of cooperation among all children, and the strengthening of social equality and democratic principles among them.

In Greece, there are limited studies that show the importance of inclusion. A research by Mikelatou and Arvanitis (2023) showed that inclusive education could promote the democratic spirit and social equality among all children and combat neoliberal policies. A study implemented by Karagianni and Montgomery (2018) in schools in Thessaloniki showed the importance of inclusive education in the cooperation and solidarity of children of different nationalities. In addition, a study by Antonopoulou et al. (2019) showed the importance of inclusive education and the democratic leadership model in promoting basic principles of democracy and equality among all children.

2.3. Notes on Inclusive Leadership

Research on the role of the inclusive leader at the international level is limited. A study implemented by Wang et al. (2020) showed that the inclusive leader can motivate both children and teachers to engage in inclusive actions in order to promote democracy and equality. Another research by Hassan and Jiang (2021) highlighted the role of the inclusive leader in engaging children in democratic activities and in the acquisition of skills that promote equality. In addition, a study by Nishii and Leroy (2022) showed that intercourse and equality can be promoted by the inclusive leader through specific inclusive activities. Furthermore, research implemented by Lambrecht et al. (2022) showed the positive effects of the actions of the inclusive leader on children's behavior and the development of a spirit of cooperation and equality between them. A study by Fitzgerald and Radford (2022) implemented in Ireland showed that the actions of the inclusive leader can enhance democratic processes in the classroom as well as in the school.

Research on inclusive leadership is quite limited in Greek schools. Initially, a study by Gotsis and Grimani (2017) highlighted the importance of peer leadership in fostering a climate of cooperation and solidarity among all children at the classroom level. Another research by Chandolia and Anastasiou (2020), which was implemented in primary schools in Epirus, showed that inclusive leaders promote equality through specific actions and strengthen democratic relations among all children. Ketikidou and Saiti (2022), in their research, showed that the inclusive leader, by implementing a range of inclusive activities in the school, strengthens cooperation and social equality among all children without exclusion and discrimination.

3. Overview of the Project

3.1. Description of the Inclusive Intervention

In March 2024, six visits to six school principals were carried out to discuss inclusive actions to promote democracy and equality. Our research participants reported that they do not implement specific inclusive actions in their school but believe in the impact of inclusive education and the strengthening of democratic values that should be implemented by the school. The school principals agreed to implement inclusive activities and, after three weeks, to carry out another visit to discuss the results of these activities.

After three weeks, another visit was made to the school principals to discuss the results of the actions implemented. Then, short interviews were carried out with the principals due to the amount of work they had to do, and through them, the role of the inclusive actions they implemented in promoting democracy and equality among all the children attending the school became evident. In particular, the inclusive school leaders implemented a series of interactive activities to enhance children's cooperation, gain a deeper understanding of democratic values, and develop a sense of equality among all children.

In addition, the inclusive leaders reported that all children were particularly enthusiastic about engaging in inclusive activities and even asked school leaders to separate their groups. More specifically, the first school leader reported that together with the children and in cooperation with the parents, they organized an exhibition of paintings of Ukrainian landscapes. The exhibition was implemented with the help of the children themselves, who were divided into mixed groups, with the simultaneous presence of all four children from Ukraine and with the help of the director and the parents of all the children who organized the exhibition. The children worked as a team, discussed the choice of tasks in a democratic way, and did the assignment of work in an equal way for all parties involved (children, school leader, parents).

The school leader of the second school, after discussing in a democratic way with the children of the school, created three groups of ten children each, with the purpose of organizing a presentation of the positive characteristics of children with dyslexia to be held in the hall of the school unit. In particular, there will be a presentation of the specific skills of children with dyslexia in mathematics. The children, with the help of the school leader, were divided into mixed groups, including five children with dyslexia. The division of the groups was done in a democratic way, as the children themselves decided on the division of the groups. Furthermore, the children worked harmoniously with each other and discussed their concerns in a democratic way, and through the presentation, equality between all the members of the groups was developed.

The third research participant created two groups of four people to organize a theatre performance with an inclusive character. More specifically, the children, with the help of the inclusive leader, created a play, and the guests were the children's parents, the school teachers, and members of the local community. Children from Albania and Syria participated in the performance and worked in a democratic way with the other children. In particular, the children wrote the script with the support of the director, and the theme of the performance promoted a democratic spirit, social equality, and solidarity.

At the fourth school, the school leader, together with four groups of four individuals, organized an information day at the city theatre for the children's families and residents of the city. The theme of the workshop was to inform all the attendees about the customs and traditions of China and Pakistan. The children, by their own decision and with the help of the inclusive leader, were divided into mixed groups, and the assignment of roles was done by the children themselves in a democratic way. The groups also included three children from China and five children from Pakistan who attended the school. The children of all groups faced their classmates with equality. They cooperated in a harmonious way, and in a democratic way, the customs to be presented were chosen.

The fifth school leader, together with six groups of four children each, drew inclusive paintings on the walls of the school. In particular, the children, with the help of the school leader, drew themes related to peace, equality, and democracy. The groups of children included two children with autism and six children from Syria. The children, in collaboration with the art teacher and the inclusive teacher, presented the drawings to the teachers of the school unit and the families of the children in the school in an event organized by the school.

The last school leader, together with groups of three children each, wrote a small song with inclusive themes, which was published in the school journal. More specifically, the songs were inspired by war, freedom, and equality among all people. In the children's groups, there were two children from Palestine who were born in Greece after their parents had emigrated from Palestine fifteen years ago. The children collaborated in a democratic way with each other, with the music teacher, and with the school leader in order to compose these songs. The roles were assigned through a fruitful dialogue between all the members and in a democratic way, thus highlighting the basic values of democracy and equality.

3.2. Main Characteristics of the Participating Schools

The schools in which our intervention was implemented were primary schools, three of which were in Athens and the other three in Thessaloniki. The first school was an intercultural school in Athens with 368 children. The school is attended by children from Ukraine who came to Athens with the beginning of the war with Russia. These children attend classes with the other children in the school, and for two hours a day, they attend classes in a special class where they learn the Greek language. The children have no friends at school because of problems in understanding the Greek language.

The second school is in Athens and consists of 249 children. In this school, there are children with special educational needs, especially with dyslexia. These children attend their lessons in the general class with the help of a parallel support teacher. These children are isolated, and at break time, they do not socialize with other children in the school. Regarding the third school unit, it is an intercultural school consisting of 457 children. The school is attended by children from Albania and Syria, who attend classes with their classmates in the general class but attend Greek language classes in a special class of the school. These children are not accompanied at school because of the difficulties they face in using the Greek language.

The fourth school unit that participated in the study was an intercultural school from Thessaloniki with 238 children. This school is attended by children from China and Pakistan who came to Greece two years ago. The children have difficulties understanding the Greek language, and for this reason, they are attending courses in the Greek language. These children, because of their language difficulties, have not formed groups at school. The fifth school where the intervention was implemented was an intercultural school from Thessaloniki with 286 children. This school is attended by children with autism and children from Syria. The children with autism attend the general class, with the presence of a parallel support teacher. The Syrian children also attend the general class, but some hours of the day, they attend Greek language classes in a special class. Children with autism and children from Syria are isolated during the break and have no friends.

The last school is in Thessaloniki and consists of 235 children. In this school, there are children from Palestine who were born in Greece and have a good knowledge of the Greek language. These children attend the general class of the school and have formed groups with their classmates without facing any difficulties.

3.3. The Identity of School Leaders

In this subsection, key points of the profile of the school leaders participating in the research will be mentioned. The names used are pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

- 1) George is 39 years old, and this is his third year as a school principal. He has two master's degrees in Special Education and School Leadership and is trying to create an inclusive culture in his school.
- 2) Helen is 41 years old and is in her fifth year as a school leader. She has a master's degree in school leadership and has created an inclusive culture and inclusive climate in her school.
- 3) Kostas is 44 years old, and this is his fourth year as school leader. He has a Master's degree in School Leadership and a specialized seminar in Leadership and is implementing inclusive activities in his school.
- 4) Maria is 45 years old and is in her first year as a school principal. She has two master's degrees in special education and school psychology and has attended a seminar in school leadership. Maria has gradually started to implement inclusive activities.
- 5) Hermes is 46 years old and is in his eighth year as a school leader. He has two master's degrees in school

- leadership and school psychology and is trying to foster an inclusive climate in his school unit.
- 6) Jenny is 49 years old and is in her tenth year of being a school principal. She has three master's degrees in special education, mathematics teaching, and school leadership. Jenny has created an inclusive culture in the school through a range of inclusive activities.

4. Results

The research data were collected from two open-ended questions that all school leaders answered verbally, as they had little time due to many bureaucratic obligations in schools. Furthermore, the two questions were part of a semi-structured interview (Knott et al., 2022). Furthermore, content analysis was the method chosen to analyze the data (Abreu et al., 2022). In particular, initial coding was applied to collect the data from the participants' interviews.

The two questions posed to school leaders were:

- 1) Q1. Did the inclusive activities that you involved the children in your school promote the democratic spirit among all children? (See Table I)
- 2) Q2. Were social equality and solidarity promoted through these activities? (See Table II)

Furthermore, in Table III there are the codes used in the content analysis. From the analysis of the data that emerged, it is clear that inclusive activities promote a democratic society. More specifically, inclusive school leaders reported that the children were particularly engaged in the activities they had to perform, and the cooperation of all children was flawless, without exclusion and discrimination of children with special educational needs and children from other countries. In addition, the inclusive school leaders involved in our intervention thought about the type of activity and encouraged the children in a subtle way. According to educational leaders, children with special educational needs and children from other countries were engaged in inclusive activities, developed democratic values, and cooperated harmoniously with their peers.

Social equality and solidarity among the children were evident among all the children. More specifically, school leaders reported that through the dialogue, the children demonstrated solidarity among themselves, as they significantly helped all their peers with special educational needs and from other countries. Furthermore, the children distinguished their tasks and roles in an equal way and did not assign more responsibilities to certain children. It is evident from the interviews with the head teachers that the inclusive leader engaging children in inclusive activities activates the democratic values of all children, engages them in activities, and promotes equality and solidarity.

5. Further Discussion and Suggestions

In many countries around the world, the model of inclusive education, which is an education for all, is applied.

TABLE I: 01. DID THE INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES THAT YOU INVOLVED THE CHILDREN IN YOUR SCHOOL PROMOTE THE DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT AMONG ALL CHILDREN?

Interviews extracts

George: Undiscovered, yes. The children all worked harmoniously with each other, they assigned roles to each other through parenting dialogue, they helped the children from Ukraine in a subtle way with issues that were difficult for them, and they all had equal activities to implement to organize the painting exhibition. In addition, it was an inclusive intervention that promoted the democratic spirit among all parties involved.

Helen: Yes, of course. More specifically, the children discussed among themselves the composition of the groups and democratically decided on the mathematical activities they would present. The children with dyslexia were involved in the activity in a positive way, and all together, with my subtle help, I participated and gave the guidelines. Furthermore, the teams democratically elected their representatives and, in an equal manner, assigned all team posts.

Kostas: The promotion of the democratic spirit during the period was more than evident. At first, the children discussed the topic among themselves and divided the mixed groups among themselves. Then, the children democratically assigned to each other the roles they would play in the theatrical performance. In addition, during the rehearsals, the children talked to each other in a harmonious way, they got to know each other better, and all of them democratically discussed the theatrical work they were going to do.

Maria: Yes, absolutely. The information day gave the opportunity for all the children of the groups that were created to work together. More specifically, the children from China and Pakistan were involved in creative activities, talking and exchanging ideas with the other members of the group. Furthermore, all the children were able to create a democratic theme about the customs and traditions of the countries to be presented.

Hermes: It was a highly democratic process. Initially, the children were divided on their own initiative into mixed groups through democratic discussion, with the participation of children with autism from Syria and with my discreet presence. Then, after discussing the subjects to be painted, they asked the school's art teacher for help in designing the paintings. The collaboration and discussion among all the children in the groups were impressive!

Jenny: It was a democratic process from beginning to end. With my discreet presence, the children were divided into mixed groups through dialogue and discussion. The children who were talented in music suggested some lyrics for the song, and together, they decided which lyrics to use with the participation of the Palestinian children. In addition, they asked for the help of the music teacher, who helped the children in composing their songs.

The promotion of a democratic spirit and cooperation among all children (A). Social equity among all participants in the inclusive activity (B). Active involvement of children in inclusive activities and development of solidarity between them (C).

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Inclusive education is education that promotes a democratic climate, fosters social equality among all children, and combats discrimination and exclusion. The school leader plays an important role in the implementation of inclusive activities that strengthen cooperation and solidarity among children for a more democratic and inclusive society. However, in Greece, there is no research on specific inclusive actions that promote democracy and social equality. This research, therefore, aims to fill this gap.

The research carried out aimed to investigate the impact of inclusive activities on strengthening democracy and equality among children. The research revealed the following advantages:

- 1) Developing relationships of cooperation and solidarity among all children.
- 2) Cultivation of democratic spirit among all children and the acquisition of democratic values.
- 3) Promoting the inclusive behavior of all children and the acceptance of diversity.

One of the findings of the research is that inclusive education enhances democratic relationships among children. Nilholm (2021) agrees with this. Furthermore, social equity and solidarity are promoted by the implementation of inclusive actions, which is in line with the literature (Göransson et al., 2022; Lambrecht et al., 2022; Materechera, 2020). In addition, the actions of the inclusive leader promote the democratic action of the children of the school (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2022; Ke et al., 2022). Also, in Greece, inclusive school leaders promote cooperation and equality without any specific inclusive actions (Antonopoulou et al., 2019; Chandolia & Anastasiou, 2020; Gotsis & Grimani, 2017; Ketikidou & Saiti, 2022; Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2023).

The research had limitations. The main ones are the following:

- 1) The few years of service the participants had as school principals.
- 2) The lack of time was due to the bureaucratic workload they had to perform.

TABLE II: O2. WERE SOCIAL EQUALITY AND SOLIDARITY PROMOTED THROUGH THESE ACTIVITIES?

Interviews extracts

George: Sure, yeah! The children shared the responsibilities they had to implement in an equal way, without thinking that, for example, the children from Ukraine should do more things since the exhibition is about landscapes from Ukraine. Also, all the children worked in solidarity and helped each other.

Helen: It was an activity that promoted the principles of equality and solidarity. All the children in the groups worked equally with each other, had the same responsibilities, and carried out the presentation of the mathematical problems in solidarity with and helping each other. The children with dyslexia felt that they were treated without discrimination and feared that their opinions were not heard.

Kostas: It was an activity in which all members of the teams that were created worked in an equal way and without discrimination. Moreover, the roles of the theatrical work were assigned by the children to their peers in an equal way, and all the members of the groups helped the children from Albania and Syria learn their words for the theatrical performance.

Maria: All the children cooperated equally and found common information about the topic of the workshop. In addition, the children from China and Pakistan worked harmoniously with the other children in the groups. In particular, the children of the groups helped the children from China and Pakistan to show the customs and traditions of their countries. Hermes: The children from Syria cooperated in an equal way with the other children of the teams that were created. More specifically, the children of the groups helped and supported the Syrian children and children with autism in designing inclusive paintings in the school hall. Furthermore, the revisions of the works were made by the children themselves with the aim of underlining and solidarity of all the children.

Jenny: Yes, of course! All the kids who actively participated in the groups that were created and thought of lyrics for the inclusive song they were going to create in an equal way. Also, the children helped their classmates from Palestine and demonstrated a spirit of solidarity with each other.

- The promotion of a democratic spirit and cooperation among all children (A). Social equity among all participants in the inclusive activity (B). Active involvement of children in inclusive activities and development of solidarity between them (C).
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TABLE III: SUBJECT AREAS

Codes	Symbols
The promotion of a democratic spirit and	A
cooperation among all children	
Social equity among all participants in the	В
inclusive activity	
Active involvement of children in inclusive	C
activities and development of solidarity between	
them	

From the findings of the research, it is clear that the research question posed has a positive answer. The implementation of these specific inclusive actions seems to promote democracy and equality in Greek schools. In particular, the children strengthened their democratic spirit and developed social equality skills during the implementation of the activities. The inclusive leader seems to enhance cooperation and solidarity among all children without exclusion or discrimination. In addition, all members of the school (parents, teachers, children) were enthusiastic about these activities and would like to repeat similar activities in the future.

6. Conclusion

The results of the implemented intervention showed that the implementation of inclusive actions by inclusive leaders can promote a democratic society and a society of equality

without discrimination. Furthermore, solidarity and cooperation among all children promote inclusive education. In Greece, there are few inclusive leaders who have applied inclusive practices to promote democracy. Therefore, there should be a list of convergent inclusive practices that could be followed by school leaders to promote democracy and social equality. 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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