

## **Combining Universal Design for Learning and Total Quality in Education for the promotion of inclusion in a Greek primary class**

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### **Abstract**

Modern social, educational and cultural challenges, emerging through the multicultural reality and the mosaic of learning diversity, makes it necessary to develop educational practices that promote inclusive education. This article studies ways to promote inclusive education through the combination of universal design for learning (UDL) and total quality in education (TQE) after an intervention in a primary class in Greece. In particular, it is guided by the question: 'How does the implementation of the principles of UDL and TQE contribute to the promotion of equal opportunities for all students?' For the purposes of the research, were used photovoice, observations, interviews as well as the reflective diary. The results revealed the dynamic of the two above-mentioned philosophies to promote inclusive education. They have led to the elimination of phenomena of marginalization, the increase of the participation, the overcome of barriers and the offer of equal opportunities to all.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, universal design for learning, total quality in education, Greek primary class

### **Introduction**

The education that will meet the needs of students and will give equal opportunities to all is not a goal of the past few years. Instead, it has emerged from the needs of the global community in recent decades (Frederickson, Dunsmuir, Lang & Monsen, 2004). It is important to mention that at the International Conference on Education in Geneva (UNESCO, 2008) the inclusive education was recognized as the only viable solution to achieve a school system based on rights where everyone has access to quality education. In Greece, efforts are being made to promote inclusion, but there seems to be considerable room for improvement (Vlachou, 2006). Although the legislation seems to make efforts, there are many complaints from the teachers' side. The views of Greek teachers on the concept of inclusive education are confused, unilateral and sometimes conflicting with each other (Fyssa, Vlachou & Avramidis, 2014). In addition, their attitude is more negatively oriented towards the development of inclusive education and acceptance of students with different characteristics and less towards the promotion of practices that would involve all students (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). What practices, however, can promote inclusion? And what role can the UDL and the TQE have to do with this goal? As we will see, the article's suggestion is that these two philosophies could contribute to this in many levels.

Through the review of the literature, there are researches that associate inclusion with UDL (Salend, 2011) and TQE (Sallis, 2005), but not enough of them to associate all three at the same time. It is important to note, however, that, on the one hand, UDL covers the cognitive - learning component, while TQE the part of organization and relationships that are shaped throughout the school unit and by extension of the school class. In this article, therefore, we will go one step further and see how combined, UDL and TQE can contribute to provide equal opportunities for all students. The investigation will be through the action research that took place in the Sixth grade of a Greek public school.

Below we will briefly present the philosophies of inclusive education, UDL and TQE and details of the methodology followed. Then the data will be analyzed and the conclusions will be discussed at the end.

### **The three philosophies**

Inclusive education relates to the ongoing effort to give equal opportunities to all students, to combat discrimination and to restructure the educational system and educational culture to encourage and increase the participation of all. It is a value process with social, cultural and democratic implications (Ainscow & Miles, 2008) and it is not only based on performance measurement and control (McMaster, 2013b). It takes ethical dimensions (Allan, 2005) and is a matter of social justice (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), referring to the exclusion and marginalization of students from everyday school activities. The values that come within this importance of inclusive education are part of the development of a school community that gives all students the feeling that they are active members and that it restructures its policies and practices so that the diversity of each student will be treated with parity (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). The aim of inclusion is therefore to identify the particular characteristics of each individual personality of each student and thus to promote and exploit these characteristics for the benefit of the learning process of all students.

In this context, the principles of UDL are also formulated. Its aim is flexibility (Rose & Meyer, 2002), engagement, participation and development of students of different competences, through the provision of facilitated pathways to the existing curriculum (Horn & Banerjee, 2009). UDL not only aims at flexibility and adaptation of content, activities, and evaluation, but also highlights this as a continuous and imperative necessity (Izzo, Murray & Novak, 2008). Courses and educational material are tailored to provide access to a wide range of students, regardless of their abilities, spoken language, culture or interests (Grassi & Barker, 2010).

The philosophy of UDL is based on three principles (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011). These are:

Provide multiple representation tools

- Provide multiple means of action and expression
- Provide multiple engagement means

In more detail, the first principle is based on the different processes followed by different learners in understanding information (Mavrou & Symeonidou, 2013). Providing multiple means of representation means offering alternatives and adapting to the presentation of information (Darragh, 2007). The second principle refers to offering opportunities for different ways a student chooses to engage and express themselves in a learning environment (Mavrou & Symeonidou, 2013). Finally, the third principle relates to increasing learning through participation and motivation, so that all students enjoy the opportunity to interact and eventually learn new information (Izzo, Murray & Novak, 2008).

The above characteristics of the active participation of all students, the improvement of the educational opportunities and means provided as well as the satisfaction of their needs, can be met in the third philosophy, the TQE. By this we refer to a continuous effort towards excellence, a continuous improvement of the school unit (Algozzine, Audette, Marr & Algozzine, 2005) and a continuous effort to meet the needs of the education clients, with the lowest possible cost (Mukhopadhyay, 2005).

According to Sallis (2005) the model of TQE focuses on six points. The first is to respond to the needs and expectations of the students as well as to overcome them. The second, the constant effort to improve school processes. This ongoing effort is based on customer needs, which are constantly changing and replaced by new ones. The third point is the active participation of students, by assigning roles of responsibility to them as well. Problem solving is best achieved when people who are directly affected by it get involved. Next in the series is the minimization of the weak points of the education system and the adoption of educational methods that promote effective and critical learning. In order for this process to be successful, continuous control and continuous evaluation of the course of implementation is a prerequisite. The fifth point is to strengthen both individual skills and team dynamics.

Teachers are important to learn the skills of their students and to extend the range of teaching methods they follow to include all students in the learning process. And finally, the active involvement of all the associated, with the functioning and the role of the school, actors. Interaction should be pursued in order to make the school a quality school.

From these points, the three principles of the philosophy of TQE emerge. These principles, are:

- focus on student needs,
- faith and dedication to continuous improvement,
- active participation of all individuals.

Thus, it is clear that TQE is a different approach and thought, which differs in the whole of the manifestations of school life and in all the members involved in it. It is a process finite in time that leads to a new way of life and thinking (Murgatroyd & Morgan, 1993). A way that is based on endless efforts to improve.

Bearing in mind the main research question that governs the present effort ‘How does the implementation of the principles of UDL and TQE contribute to the promotion of equal opportunities for all students?’ and trying to link the two philosophies, we see in summary that UDL contributes to the formation of teaching options and TQE provides a structured framework for reform and improvement. So it is urgently requested the promotion of inclusive education, especially in Greece, where research shows, on the one hand, the poor quality of practices adopted by Greek teachers and their low effectiveness for all students (Fyssa & Vlachou, 2015; Fyssa, Vlachou & Avramidis, 2014) and, on the other hand, demonstrate the general remodeling of the whole school system as the way to successful implementation of inclusion (Noula, Cowan & Govaris, 2015). Let us therefore see the combination of these philosophies as they have been took place.

#### **The study**

The research effort was focused on mapping a given classroom environment in a Greek primary school and exploring perceptions, behaviors and changes after action. For its needs, a naturalistic, qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) was chosen and specifically the action – research method (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Upon entering the school, the training staff was informed of my intention to conduct the research and was emphasized the voluntary nature of the participation. The teacher who responded was that of the 6th grade class, who faced problems of reduced participation and marginalization in his class and wished to cope with them. In total participated 14 persons. Six students, their parents, the teacher and the parallel support teacher of the class.

The investigation began with the initial classroom evaluation. The participants' perspective of the educational practices used was explored. For this purpose, the method of photovoice was first used (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants were provided with details of how to use the camera and instructions for taking pictures. The interviews were taken after the photos. We discussed upon the photos and what they reflected (Schwartz, 1989). The interviews were semi-structured (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), individual (Creswell, 2007) for teachers and in groups for students and parents (King & Horrocks, 2010). Interview time ranged from 45' to 60' and the groups were of 2 to 3 persons. At the same time, the observation method (Patton, 2015) and my personal reflective diary (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2001) were used. The observation was non-participatory and semi-structured and was related to the processes taking place inside and outside the classroom. The first phase of the initial evaluation lasted a semester.

The problems that emerged in the first phase led me to proceed to the second phase of the research, which was the intervention in the classroom. This was about trying to involve participants in the implementation of the principles of UDL and TQE under the aim of structured and conscious promotion of inclusion. Intervention was through the design and teaching of the History course and took place in the second semester. During the second

phase, notes were taken of the participants' comments and comments on the intervention and the reflective diary. Interviews and photovoice did not take place.

The survey was completed with the third phase and the final evaluation of the intervention. This took place in the third semester of the school year and was designed just like the first one. It is important to note that all interviews (initial and final) were returned to the participants for annotation and confirmation of what they said (member check).

For data analysis the constant comparative method was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, all the data underwent a lasting, persistent and universal comparison of each other until the emergence of categories that could not be changed. For the first phase the categories were the learning process and the classroom climate, while for the second and third phases was the UDL and the TQE. In the first case, the categories helped me to draw conclusions about the current level of inclusive education development, while for the latter the degree of its promotion.

In order to establish credibility in my research, various techniques were used. Some of these were the triangulation of methodologies, the data triangulation as well as the triangulation of visual angles. The data were compared not only to each other but also I was working on them from my own point of view and against what I was saying and what I noticed and perceived. This triple comparison helped to get to the truth of the situations and relationships that prevailed in this class (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **The three phases**

As mentioned above, the survey has been divided into three phases, each one resulting from necessity from the previous one. Below are presented the data that came out of each phase in turn.

#### *First phase – initial evaluation*

The initial evaluation of the Sixth Class revealed aspects of the interactions and relationships that took place between students, teachers and parents, about the participation of students in the daily lesson, the obstacles that appeared and the efforts of teacher to access them.

Initially, with regard to the climate and the relationships that formed, the participants expressed different opinions that often contradicted each other. More specifically, although everyone's suggestion for relations began in positive words, they always kept referring to problems. The following words belong to Helen (student) and Maria (mother).

Helen: *'We all play together. Only Vicky doesn't play. She has Asperger and bothers us at breaks. We have told it to the teacher and he told us not to discuss this issue.'*

Maria: *'Generally they are doing well. There is a problem with Vicky and Panagiotis. However, in teacher's behavior there is a problem. I see that there is a prejudice for some students and this affects the relationships between them.'*

Their words were also supported by my observations, in which several times I witnessed incidents where the teacher appeared to discriminate certain students, always blaming the same individuals. This led them to be marginalized at break time by their classmates, as was observed. Vicky and Panagiotis were a typical example of students who were facing this problem.

These behaviors were often transferred at the time of the lesson. Katerina (parallel support teacher for Vicky) and Iacovos (student) stated specifically.

Katerina: *'Often it's not Vicky, but Panagiotis who poses us a problem. He wants to attract constant attention.'*

Iacovos: *'Sometimes it's nice, but when you say stop, he (Panagiotis) doesn't stop, so he continues and becomes annoying.'*

However, Panagiotis himself, who participated in the survey, expressed his dissatisfaction with this confrontation. According to his words, the teacher was unfair to him and even accused him of things he did not do.

Panagiotis: *'I may ask my classmate something that I haven't understood from the lesson and immediately the teacher is blaming me. That's what is always happen. It's unfair.'*

Thus, in addition to the relationships, the difficulties faced by the students in the lessons came out. They referred to participation, obstacles and variations made by the teacher for a better understanding of the lessons. Konstantinos (teacher), Georgia (mother) and Alexandra (student) commented as follows.

Konstantinos: *'Sometimes we work with the computer. It attracts interest. The History, however, troubled me. I see in their eyes, even of the most excellent students, a question of why we are doing it all now, how hateful this book is and this is a hindrance to their participation. I think, however, that the secret to most lessons is an approach of joke.'*

Georgia: *'The books don't serve anywhere. For example, the book of History is tragic.'*

Alexandra: *'The lessons are quite difficult. Especially I can't understand History at all. The others are better. Sometimes we do some presentations and we like it, or we see the lesson from the computer. But I still want more help.'*

As I have also written in my notes, the teacher's attempt to make the lesson more accessible through jokes has been fruitful, especially when there were no other hindrances to burden students' work. In any case, however, judging from my observations, it was rather a way of relaxation, rather than a means of promoting students' understanding and performance. The difficulties were obvious and the complaints on both the students' and the parents' side were many.

Concluding, therefore, the first phase revealed the degree of development of inclusive education. The conclusion was that in some aspects there were inclusive features, while in others there was serious lack of them. In particular, the aspects that have revealed its development have been tainted by the existence of close friendships between students as well as the attempts to differentiate the lessons from the teacher's point of view. However, the teacher's interaction with some students, his indifference to their voices, his lack of willingness to increase everyone's participation, and the existence of marginalized students made it impossible to classify inclusive education as developed in that particular department.

#### *Second phase - intervention*

During the intervention, an attempt was made to cover the principles of UDL and TQE to promote the inclusion of all students and to overcome the obstacles that existed during the first phase of the research. Eighteen History courses were conducted throughout the intervention.

'Bookbuilder', a tool provided free of charge by CAST, was used for the design of the history lessons. This application enables the user to create a digital book from the beginning, in which he can import images, sound and videos in addition to the text. Significant detail is the existence of assistants in the book who take the role that the user wants, as well as the existence of the vocabulary, to which anyone can look and find an unknown word of the text.

Thus, the digital book created for each lesson covered the first principle of UDL, since it provided multiple ways of presenting the lesson, the second one by promoting the presentation through different ways by the students, and finally the third principle as it provided an environment that was accessible and enjoyable as an incentive for active participation and increased interest. In addition to UDL, the lesson was designed also based on the principles of TQE.

For the first principle, in each lesson an attempt was made to meet the needs of all. Particularly, students to understand the historical concepts and learn historical events, the teacher's need translated into a lesson that was interesting and accessible to everyone and

the need of parents for a lesson that their children will love and they could read it and understand it on their own.

In order to achieve the second principle, in cooperation with the teacher, we were continuously improving our teaching to ensure that students are not ambivalent and that everyone is involved. At this point, the third principle appeared. In particular, the class teacher co-operated with me to design and complete the lesson, the students actively participated in the classroom in the sense that they were watching, interacting with the lesson and giving us feedback, and we sought the engagement of the parents through their comments.

Based on the above, the digital books, that were created, had the following structure. The digital book started with the title, some relative images, the summary and the objectives of the lesson. Subsequently, there was the text of the school book and beneath the three assistants. The first two analyzed the paragraphs written on the page, while the third one set questions based on that text. It is important here to mention that everything written in the digital book was given at the same time in an audio format. When the book was being created, all the texts were recorded, so that the students who were listening or mixed learning types were given the opportunity to listen rather than read the text. In the last pages there was additional support material, such as videos, conceptual maps or diagrams.

Based on the digital book, the course followed the following steps. Initially, all students sat in a u - shaped layout of desks and watched the digital book being displayed on the table. The students read the text, in order to clarify the significant points of the lesson and to get to know the content. Then, they were divided into three groups of four persons and each group was processing a piece of the lesson on their computer. After processing, the groups presented their piece to their classmates and asked them questions. At the end, a summary of the lesson was made and any questions from the students were solved.

#### *Third phase – final evaluation*

With the completion of the lessons in History, it became apparent the differentiation in the pre-intervening reality of the class.

Initially, there has been a change in relationships and interactions between students, teachers and parents. Christina (student), Suzana (mother) as well as Konstantinos (class teacher) were expressed as follows.

Christina: *'I liked being in a group. I helped them, but they did not help me a lot, because they could not. But that was also important, because otherwise it would not be just a job for two people.'*

Suzana: *'Because my child was isolated and antisocial I think he helped him too much. The team supported him ... Yes and Vicky had a great improvement this year. She saw that she had to work with the children and the others saw that they could work with her.'*

Konstantinos: *'In the second photo we wanted to show how much more interesting they found the lesson, as they were working together, cooperatively. They discovered each other through this collaboration and therefore had more active access to the lesson.'*

Konstantinos (class teacher) and Katerina (parallel support teacher) also noticed a significant change in the participation of the course.

Konstantinos: *'The big difference, of course, comparatively to my own more traditional way, was the participation of children. Their participation increased steeply. Even students who were very low in performance, even the girl who will go to a special school next year, were in the first place willing to participate.'*

Katerina: *'Everyone involved, many children wanted to answer, even students that they did not know how to answer, all of them participated in the lesson of History. Even with the parents we came closer.'*

Apart from the two teachers, the students themselves seemed to hold a more positive attitude to the lesson and they made similar comments (Nikolaos and Panagiotis). Respectively, parents (Georgia) also revealed the coverage of their needs.

Nikolaos: *'I liked when I had the computer mouse. I was responsible. I was more involved.'*

Panagiotis: *'I liked listening to the lesson rather than reading it and working it in groups. It helped me and you've made me love the lesson of History.'*

Georgia: *'My child was crying the past years in history. This year we didn't have that.'*

These comments were in line with what I observed and wrote in my notes. I observed the students working with equal opportunities, participating, being interested in the lesson and trying to improve it and improve themselves through it. In addition, the teacher was taking initiatives to adapt the lesson and was leaving aside discriminatory and injustice behaviors. Finally, parents were satisfied with the performance and attitudes of their children, but mostly they felt active, as they themselves have been involved in the shaping of the whole intervention.

Consequently, the analysis of the final evaluation showed that the initial objective of the intervention was largely met. In particular, analyzing each principle and its contribution to achieve the goal, the first principle of UDL increased the understanding of the course and met the learning needs of all students. The second principle has helped to increase active participation in the course and interest. Students who were previously on the sidelines took leadership roles in the lesson, came to the fore and came out of exclusion and defamation. In addition, the third principle of UDL also helped the students to cultivate learning strategies that matched their style and to show important interest in the new way of teaching through the assistant characters, the recordings and the vocabulary.

At the same time, the three principles of TQE have contributed to directions such as fostering collaboration, promoting teamwork and solidarity and striving to achieve the best possible result. In particular, in the light of the first principle, I tried and, according to the final comments, I managed to organize courses that were accessible and close to the students, helpful to the parents and finally auxiliary to the teacher. Additionally, the second principle, the commitment to continuous improvement, led me to constantly create the lesson to the needs and according to the children's voices. This has resulted in increased participation and interest being present in each lesson. This effort was soon passed on to the students, as they themselves insisted on the correct processing and presentation of the lessons and treated them with more caution and responsibility. A circle between interest, participation and improvement was created. One led to the other and the circle started again from the beginning. Finally, the third principle of TQE, the participation of all, played a particularly important role in achieving the original goal. The course was designed in a teamwork structure where each member had to perform specific tasks. This option helped students to understand that their role in the group is just as important and necessary as the others, and that in fact the members of each group are a chain that, without the effort and contribution of all, is in danger of being broken.

Looking back on the positive effects of the principles of the two philosophies, we see that they have made a decisive contribution to the promotion of inclusive education. The degree of inclusion growth, from a modest one judged during the initial evaluation, has now increased significantly, broadly covering the conditions for its promotion. During and after the intervention, the obstacles that had originally appeared were overcome, the marginalization phenomena were eliminated, and their position took the consensus, collegiality, acceptance, cooperation and participation. All participants saw their needs covered and student relationships improved, within a learning environment where equal opportunities and equal treatment for all were offered. The two philosophies have been instrumental in highlighting students as important and active elements of the course and eventually led to the promotion of inclusive education to the fullest extent possible.

## Conclusions

In this research I tried to explore ways to promote inclusive education through UDL and TQE. Through the intervention that took place in the history lesson in the sixth grade of a Greek elementary school, various aspects have emerged, according to which the above objective can be achieved. Aspects, such as:

- the design of teaching to respond to each learner's style,
- giving students the opportunity to participate actively in the course, design and presentation of the course,
- the choice of teaching material that is easy to understand, accessible, interesting and consistent in terms of needs,
- attention to the needs of the teacher, students and their parents, as expressed by themselves, and the effort to satisfy them,
- continuous effort to improve yourself and improve the course conditions, as well as
- the active role of everyone

shaped the reality of the class and gave the opportunity for inclusive education to flourish further. Of course, CAST's Bookbuilder is only one suggestion to reconcile the two philosophies that were exploited and presented here. The needs of each class are very likely to require the use of a different material. It is at the discretion of each teacher to create his own material based on the two philosophies.

The above aspects are also encountered by other researchers (Watkins, 2012; Ferguson, 2008; Florian & Spratt, 2013), revealing the dynamic of UDL and TQE in the effort to promote inclusive education. In addition to linking the three philosophies, it is essential to emphasize the connection of the two first. For this link, the bibliographic review has not provided enough evidence, but this is also the originality of this research.

More specifically, the first principle of UDL was largely promoted by the principle of the belief in continual improvement in TQE. The second one made me constantly looking for new ways to present the lesson to my students, so that were improved both my teaching style and myself. Correspondingly, the second principle of UDL was combined with the principle of meeting the needs of all. The principle of providing multiple opportunities for students to present their knowledge was complementary to my goal of meeting the needs of all, and this has resulted in the removal of the marginalization barriers related to the lessons. Finally, the third principles of the two philosophies, which were aimed in the same direction, also worked together. In particular, the one aiming at the active engagement and the other at the active participation of all, have contributed to provide ever-increasing opportunities for participation to all children.

Combined, the 6 principles of the two philosophies can offer both to researchers and educators clear guidelines for taking, designing and implementing decisions aimed at providing equal opportunities for all students, eliminating marginalization, accepting diversity, increasing the involvement of all, removing any obstacles and promoting and refining a class in general in inclusive education.

Within Greece, the research results add a significant stumbling block and provide a clear framework for organizing, designing and developing a program that aims to promote inclusive education in a classroom. This research offers a dynamic proposal to address the problems that characterize Greece's existing education system, since it reflects the true meaning of inclusion puts it in the spotlight and approaches it globally from different sides in order to fully cover it. Both theoretical and practical research data around this field is enriched, the idea of inclusive education is spreading and change appears to take place, even on the small scale of one class.



The design of an intervention based on UDL and TQE seems to respond to the question of modern Greek educational reality for giving equal opportunities for learning and participation to all students. The different diversity of every single child in Greek schools seems to be able to be satisfied within these frameworks of educational activity and that is the demand of our times.

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