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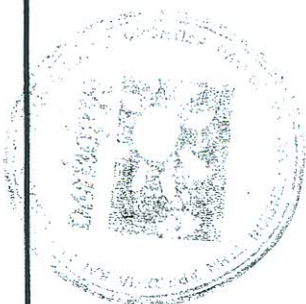
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Children with a Chronic and Life-Limiting Condition: Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences Regarding Students' School Integration

Danaï Papadatou
Olga Metallinou
Chryse Hatzichristou
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The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Greek teachers regarding the school integration of students with a chronic and life-limiting condition. This national survey comprised a representative sample of 1,792 educators. Of the sample, 19 percent (n = 340) had at least a child with a serious disease in their classroom throughout their career and were faced with increased academic difficulties and few changes in the child's behavior. Affected by their student's health problem, educators systematically avoided discussing the illness experience with the child and classmates. They tended to become more lenient in their grading, less expectant of high academic performance, and more supportive of the ill child. To facilitate the student's school integration, Greek educators, who felt unprepared to handle such situations, requested training, a closer cooperation with mental health professionals, and ongoing support to effectively handle the experience of a serious illness within their classroom.

The dramatic medical achievements that occurred during the past few decades have contributed to the cure of several children who were diagnosed with a life-limiting disease. Van Eyes (1976) suggested that these children can be considered as "truly cured" only if biological along with psychosocial standards are taken into account. Like many other

This study was funded by the European Union and the Ministry of Education of Greece. The study is part of a major project titled *Sensitization and Training of Educators and Health Care Providers in Supporting Seriously Ill and Bereaved Children* (1998-2000) (project leader: D. Papadatou).

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clinicians, he encouraged health care professionals to design appropriate interventions that would respond to the complex psychosocial needs of seriously ill children and their family members from the very moment of diagnosis of a chronic and potentially fatal disease. Such interventions aim at helping the family to meet the practical and emotional challenges of the illness and treatment and promote a sense of "normalcy" in the midst of dealing with major life changes.

Normalcy in children's lives can be promoted in different ways. A critical one is regular school attendance and integration into the stream of school life. School attendance serves both educational and psychosocial purposes. It provides the child with education, necessary for self-esteem and hope for the future; enhances the development of social skills with healthy peers; and offers organization in a student's life, thus promoting a sense of control (Eiser and Town 1987; Stevens et al. 1988; Stevenson 1995; Worchel-Prevatt et al. 1998).

Findings of relevant research in various educational settings indicate that school reentry and integration may often become problematic when the child suffers from a serious disease or has been hospitalized for an extended period of time. Potential difficulties in school integration can be grouped in four major interrelated categories:

1. Disease and treatment difficulties: even though repeated hospitalizations or regular visits to the clinic may keep the child away from school, it has been noted that rarely do such medical factors explain the high rate of absenteeism that is common among children with a chronic and life-threatening illness (Henning and Fritz 1983).
2. Child-related difficulties: the most frequently reported difficulties stem from the child's anxiety about being teased and handling questions from peers. In addition, changes in appearance and the inability to keep up with school work due to prolonged absences may increase the youngster's anxiety, who withdraws and becomes isolated from peers (McCormick 1986; Worchel 1992).
3. Parent-related difficulties: parents often deal with their anxiety and guilt over the child's disease by overprotecting him or her. They are reluctant to send him or her to school because they fear infections or peers' remarks and teasing. The possibility that their child may die some day causes them to cling to him or her and consider school as "a waste of time" (Henning and Fritz 1983; Lawson 1977).
4. Teacher-related difficulties: studies exploring teachers' attitudes toward sick children indicate that educators are emotionally affected by the diagnosis of a serious illness in their students and are concerned about the following issues: (1) the lack of knowledge about the disease and the handling of medical emergencies, (2) the uncertainty about student's capabilities that would determine realistic academic expectations, and (3) the inability to handle classmates' reactions (Chekryn, Deegan, and Reid 1987; Davis 1989; Eiser and Town 1987; Stevens et al. 1988).

