Getting along with peers in mainstream primary schools: The role of pedagogy in shaping the social status of pupils identified as having special educational needs in Cyprus

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Abstract
This paper explores how pedagogy of teachers impedes or enhances the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs, in mainstream primary education in Cyprus. It draws on empirical data collected from research that took place in five mainstream primary schools. Data collection commenced in January 2007 and was completed in June of the same year. The direct participants were 146 pupils, aged 8 to 10 years, as well as ten classroom and special support teachers. In terms of methodology, I employed a mixed methods approach. In particular, sociometry was utilised in the first phase of data collection, while in-depth observations and interviews with pupils and teachers comprised the main research methods during the second phase. The findings suggest that the teaching arrangements and pedagogical approaches employed by many teachers impede rather than promote the social status of most of the pupils, identified as having special educational needs.

Inclusion in Cyprus
At present, the Cypriot education system, in alignment with other European countries, has moved towards more inclusive policies and practices so as to provide education for pupils, identified as having special educational needs, in mainstream settings. Traditionally, provision for these children had taken place only in segregated special schools. The 1979 Special Education Act (MEC, 1979), which had been in force until the mid 1990s, called for the education of ‘disabled’ children in segregated settings. However, the introduction of the 1999 Education Act for Children with Special Needs (MEC, 1999) affirmed that all children have the right to be educated in their neighbourhood school alongside their peers. Despite this law, a very small proportion of pupils, mainly with physical disabilities, such as blindness or deafness, and severe mental problems, still attend special schools. There are nine special schools operating within the

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Cypriot education system, with 279 pupils on roll in 2006-2007. For the same year, in terms of attendance at mainstream primary education, 2724 pupils, that is 5.05% of school population, were identified as having special educational needs.

Apart from inclusion, the other three central terms in this paper are: social status, special educational needs and inclusion. Hereinafter, it is vital to show how these terms are being used within the framework of this paper.

The term ‘social status’ refers to the social contacts and social relationships between pupils identified as having special educational needs and their peers. In Cyprus, among stakeholders and especially parents, the enhancement of these social contacts and interactions is generally considered as the most important aspect of inclusion. Pupils identified as having special educational needs are expected to gain social benefits from inclusion rather than developing academically. This view is also supported by other international research studies, which have shown that opportunities for interactions and social contacts with peers is one of the main motives of parents for deciding to send their child, identified as having special educational needs, to a mainstream school (Sloper and Tyler, 1992; Scheepstra, 1998). However, as Rustemier (2002) notes, a child can be physically included in a group by sharing a location, but socially, emotionally and intellectually excluded by being unable to participate in activities and in the learning that is occurring. Therefore, inclusion can be implemented on a solely locational level, whilst aspects of social and academic inclusion are not or are only partly realised. Hence, it is important to draw a distinction between access to education and participation in it (Florian, 2007).

Within the Cypriot framework, the term ‘special educational needs’ is being used concurrently with the term ‘special needs’. According to the 1999 Education Act (MEC, 1999) and the regulations that governed its implementation in 2001, a child has ‘special needs’ if he/she has profound learning or specific learning difficulties due to physical, mental or other cognitive and psychological problems. Such children require special educational provision (MEC, 2001). A child has profound learning or specific learning difficulties if he/she:

- experiences significantly greater learning difficulties than his/her age-mates;
- has difficulties that constrain or exclude him/her from utilising the educational facilities provided for them in their schools.

Within the framework of this paper the term ‘special educational needs’ refers to these children who are entitled to special educational provision in line with the 1999 Education Act.

Arguably, within the Cypriot educational system it seems that there is a confusion surrounding the concept of inclusion. Sometimes this term is being used concurrently with the term ‘integration’ while, in other cases, it implies the introduction of a more radical set of changes through which schools restructure themselves in order to be able to embrace all children. The respective legislation calls for ‘integration’ and/or ‘inclusion’ to be implemented through attendance at special support classes in mainstream schools.
and in some cases at special schools. According to the dominant discourses children, identified as having special educational needs, are considered most likely to benefit from individual learning support when it is offered outside the classroom. In practice, this literally means that these children have to be educated in special support classes and/or special schools with the assumption that this is the way they will acquire those characteristics that will help them to fit into society: to become as ‘normal as possible’. In summary, teachers have mixed ideas about the so-called inclusive education and these ideas are reflected in their everyday practices.

Method
The research took place in five mainstream primary schools in Cyprus, across a total of eight classrooms. Data collection commenced in January 2007 and was completed in June of the same year. The selection of schools was accomplished in terms of accessibility and location. Four rural and four urban classrooms were finally selected.

In terms of collecting the data I followed a mixed methods approach. In respect to the research design, I employed the sequential transformative design adopted by Creswell (2003), with two distinct data collection phases. In the first quantitative phase, a sociometric questionnaire was completed by all 146 pupils across the eight classes. This method provided a vivid snapshot of the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs, by ascertaining how far these pupils were sociometrically accepted or rejected. According to the individual score of each pupil, the sociometric status comprises five categories namely, ‘popular’, ‘rejected’, ‘neglected’, ‘controversial’, and ‘average’. Whilst this phase could not tell the ‘why’, it offered a necessary foundation to explore more fully the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs. Thus, in order to gain a fuller understanding, a second qualitative phase of data collection was employed. This phase was much more extended in terms of time, research methods and techniques, including numerous observation sessions, forty interviews with pupils, nine semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers, as well as many informal conversations and discussions with participants. Moreover, I kept a research diary throughout the whole research process which resulted in a wealth of data.

Data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Analysing the sociometric questionnaire was fairly straightforward as I employed a standard statistical procedure proposed by Coie and Dodge (1983). The sociometric results were valuable for a number of reasons. First, they provided a picture of the sociometric status of pupils identified as having special educational needs from the perspective of pupils themselves. Second, they enabled me to initiate communication and develop a relationship and rapport with the participants, as sociometry was the first method to be employed. Furthermore, sociometric results allowed me to proceed in purposeful sampling during the interviews with pupils and indeed support my claims within the interviews with teachers.
In terms of qualitative analysis, and in order to present as coherently as possible the data across the schools, I have employed the metaphor of a ‘mosaic’. However, before doing so, my primary purpose was to draw the ‘portrait’ of each of the five schools in regards to the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs and, inevitably, according to my current understandings of inclusion, my up-to-date readings and my philosophical stance as a researcher. In doing so, vignettes, extracts from interviews and informal conversations were presented in an attempt to remain as close as possible to the real voices of participants. Indeed, this was not an easy enterprise.

Within the framework of this paper I reflect on the pedagogy of teachers across the schools so as to show how the social status of pupils identified as having special educational needs is enhanced or impeded by the everyday teaching arrangements and pedagogical approaches that teachers employ.

**Social status**
The findings of this study point out the considerably low social status of most of the pupils, identified as having special educational needs. In particular, the sociometric status (see table 1) of these pupils, which provides a significant indicator of their overall social status, suggests that the great majority of these pupils remain marginalised and excluded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status type</th>
<th>Pupils classified as having special educational needs</th>
<th>Peers not classified as having special educational needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F (%)</td>
<td>f (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>11 68.8</td>
<td>30 23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>45 34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglected</td>
<td>1 6.3</td>
<td>15 11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversial</td>
<td>1 6.3</td>
<td>7 5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3 18.8</td>
<td>33 25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>16 100</td>
<td>130 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, sociometric results, as shown in table 1, are very striking but perhaps not surprising. The first finding of particular concern is that more than two thirds of the pupils, identified as having special educational needs, are classified as ‘rejected’. What is further remarkable is that none of these children is placed in the ‘popular’ group. It becomes evident that these pupils are not, by any means, sociometrically accepted. On the contrary, they seem to be overwhelmingly rejected and socially excluded.

Classification reveals obvious differences between the two groups of pupils. Those differences are particularly great as far as ‘rejected’ and ‘popular’ status types are concerned. That is, eleven (68.8%) pupils identified as having special educational needs, out of a total sixteen, were classified as ‘rejected’ and none of them as ‘popular’. Respectively, the ‘rejection’ percentage regarding the pupils, not classified as having
special educational needs, is three times lower (23.1%) whereas the ‘popular’ status type is much higher (34.6%). It should be noted here that many of the ‘rejected’ children, not classified as having special educational needs, are in the process of being classified or their parents do not wish them to be classified as such. This information was given by teachers after a discussion we had had on the sociometric results of their respective classes. These sociometric findings suggest that despite the official identification of a child as having special educational needs, there are many pupils who are not identified as such who run the risk of being excluded and marginalised within their classrooms and schools. The respective percentages of pupils, 23.1% ‘rejected’ and 11.5% ‘neglected’, can not be overlooked and should urge teachers to take care of all pupils in their classes.

An emerging comparison between the two groups of pupils shows that pupils, identified as having special educational needs, experience less social acceptance in the classroom. They are, on average, more ‘rejected’ and not at all ‘popular’. These results are a cause of considerable alarm. The findings suggest that these pupils are highly rejected by peers. It seems that despite the articulated attempts of implementing inclusive education in Cyprus, these pupils do not engage in social interactions with their peers and have limited social contacts with them. These findings are in great disagreement with the primary justification for inclusion within the Cyprus framework; that is, the promotion of social inclusion of pupils identified as having ‘special needs’. The sociometric findings correspond with the findings from interviews and observations, as well as findings from other research within the Cypriot context and elsewhere.

**The role of pedagogy in shaping the social status**

In this section, I explore the role of pedagogy in shaping the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs, in the eight classes studied. Alexander (2004, p.11) defines pedagogy as ‘the act of teaching, together with its attendant discourse’. According to him, pedagogy involves ‘what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted’. Furthermore, he points out several domains of ideas and values that include the understandings of children, learning, teaching and curriculum which enable teaching to happen, as well as the school and policy contexts which formalise and legitimise it. Alexander considers also that attention should be given to ‘culture’ and in particular to the two fundamental elements of it, ‘self’ and ‘history’ that ‘anchor teaching firmly to the questions of human identity and social purpose without which teaching makes little sense’ (p.12).

Using this definition of pedagogy given by Alexander as a framework of analysis, some useful links to pedagogy in the context of inclusion in this study can be extracted. The research evidence of this study suggests that both the ‘act of teaching’ and ‘its attendant discourse’ are quite problematic, resulting often in the decreased participation of pupils identified as having special educational needs within teaching and learning. This is also true for pupils who are not officially identified as such but are on the borderline of being identified, or their parents have not given consent to the identification process.
Across the five schools, data suggested that the teaching arrangements and pedagogical approaches employed by many teachers impede rather than promote the participation of pupils and, in particular, of those identified as having special educational needs. The way teachers teach, value pupils and behave towards them, in conjunction with the school and policy contexts, impede or enhance the participation of all pupils. Three key areas have been found to influence the overall pedagogy of teachers. These three key areas, along with their various ramifications, are analysed within this section:

- Government policy contexts towards inclusion:
  - 1999 Education Act
  - National curriculum
- Teachers’ values, beliefs, and teaching arrangements:
  - Fixed-ability teaching
  - Learning expectations
  - Notion of achievement within inclusion
- Role of special support staff and classroom teachers’ training
  - Special support or mainstream classroom teachers
  - Initial and in-service training of classroom teachers

**Government policy contexts towards inclusion**

According to Alexander (2004) pedagogy involves among many other aspects the policy contexts that formalise and legitimise it. Arguably, the 1999 Education Act and the prescribed national curriculum comprise the two most important policy documents with respect to inclusion. Findings from this study suggest that both act as key barriers to the development of inclusive education. These two policy documents influence the everyday practices of teachers and, in extenso, restrict the participation of pupils identified as having special educational needs from many aspects of learning that occur within the school.

*1999 Education Act*

The 1999 Education Act officially introduced the term ‘integration’ and/or ‘inclusion’ to the Cypriot educational system. However, it is crucial to note the ambiguity that accompanies these terms and several issues of translation in the Cypriot context. The guidelines that rule the implementation of the 1999 Education Act actually reinforce the segregation of pupils, identified as having special educational needs within the mainstream. These pupils’ education takes place both in mainstream and special support classrooms. The law does not require special support teachers to implement co-teaching with classroom teachers in the mainstream class. Instead, pupils are withdrawn to a ‘special education’ class for a number of teaching periods per week in order to receive special educational provision. The number of teaching hours varies according to each child’s individual assessment. This practice itself acts as a barrier to inclusive pedagogy because it is, by definition, exclusive. For example, children in interviews and informal conversations described their peers, identified as having special educational needs, in terms of being ‘different from them’, ‘less able’, ‘problematic’, and so forth. Therefore,
this practice, which is encouraged by the respective law, provides grounds for prejudicial behaviours, stereotyping, stigmatisation, and indeed exclusion and low social status.

National curriculum
Arguably, curriculum is a contested concept and can be defined in many ways (Rose, 2007). The Cypriot national curriculum for primary education is set by the state and is common for all schools and pupils. The problem with this kind of prescribed and rigid curriculum, as emerged from this study, is its inability to meet the needs of a wide range of learners, including pupils identified as having special educational needs. The curriculum’s increased attention on a standardised content, together with standards of achievement and a single system of assessment, inhibits a significant proportion of the school population access to it.

Curriculum development in Cyprus seems to have followed a particular pattern, namely matching content, process and outcomes to the cognitive, developmental, social and functional needs of some kind of nominal ‘average’ pupil. Within this view, on the one hand, there are some pupils who underachieve because they cannot follow the pace of the curriculum and thus special support is provided to them. On the other, there are the so-called gifted children, for whom the curriculum offers insufficient learning challenges. It seems clear that the Cypriot curriculum is informed by beliefs about the perceived deficits of some children. This is ultimately a barrier to inclusive education and pedagogy, contributing further to the exclusion of pupils, identified as having special educational needs. Likewise, the influence of behavioural psychology is obvious. This has led to the adoption of an objectives-based curriculum, direct-instruction and precision teaching. As many teachers from across all five schools stated, their bedrock in teaching is to have clear objectives that are delivered through direct and teacher-centre instruction.

Taking into account the national curriculum, it seems that mainstream schools are not yet ready to accommodate the needs of a diverse student population. Pupils, identified as having special educational needs, have been admitted to schools in an effort to support policies of inclusion and human rights, but without sufficient support and infrastructure in place to ensure an inclusive educational system. As Iyanar (2000) argues, the curriculum lies at the heart of ensuring that inclusion becomes a reality rather than a series of good intentions. Therefore, the philanthropic view of inclusion in Cyprus, according to which disabled people need to be taken care of, has to be challenged, so as to begin to establish the real process of inclusion. As Rose (2007) notes, whilst placement in mainstream settings is the first critical step to inclusion, it is not enough and is essential to recognise that it constitutes only the beginning of the process.

Teachers’ values, beliefs, and teaching arrangements
Central to an understanding of pedagogy are the values and beliefs of teachers as they shape their everyday teaching arrangements and practices. The pedagogical practices of the majority of teachers, in the eight classes studied, were driven by deterministic beliefs about ability and low learning expectations about pupils identified as having special educational needs. Moreover, the achievement of peers, who have not been identified as
such, was perceived by both teachers and parents, and peers themselves, as being detrimentally influenced by the presence of these pupils within their classes.

**Fixed-ability teaching**

Within the Cypriot context teaching strategies were found to be based on notions of fixed ability, assuming a stable relation between the present and future. For example, as Hart and her colleagues note (2004, 2007), those pupils designated as ‘more able’, ‘average’ and ‘less able’ at present will tend to remain so in the future. A sound example of this in practice is Mr. Antonis at Zoniana School (see vignette 1), who differentiates between his pupils according to their learning abilities, feeling proud of those he describes as ‘more able’. He understands his task as a teacher as being to assess ability accurately and, by matching teaching to ability, enable each pupil to realise his or her given potential. Furthermore, the majority of teachers across the eight classes employed teacher-centred and non-dynamic pedagogical and instructional strategies: namely ‘chalk and talk’, didactic and non-collaborative approaches and other traditional methods.

**Vignette 1 – Give us the correct answer: Mr. Antonis approach**

It is a Wednesday morning in April during my first days at the school. I am sitting in the staff room waiting for Mr. Antonis to accompany me to the class for a two-period mathematics session. After a while he arrives holding his black leather briefcase. He immediately says good morning to me and kindly asks me if I want a coffee. I say ‘yes’ and he picks up the phone ordering two coffees. During our coffee drinking I find the chance to ask and give answers to questions of Mr. Antonis. I also explain in detail my research focus and the purpose of my school visits. It is absolutely clear from our conversation that Mr. Antonis is not aware that Katerina is identified as having special educational needs. He says that he knows that many pupils in this class have learning difficulties but he didn’t have in mind Katerina’s case. I am rather surprised by this, but at the same time the sound of the bell goes off. Immediately we make our way to the classroom.

On entering the class the children burst into enthusiasm due to my presence. Mr. Antonis informs them that I will observe the lesson and asks them to do their best so as to impress me. Meanwhile, he points to a chair for me at the back of the classroom but he also suggests I move around if I want to. In the beginning of the lesson he asks the children to remain silent and keep their maths book closed. He then poses a number of questions so as to consolidate previous knowledge with the upcoming lesson. Out of the twenty pupils only five to six regularly raise their hands and respond to questions. Mr. Antonis then looking at the class says: ‘Open your books at page 87. Today we are going to solve problems to see if you understand what we have been doing for the last lessons. Manoli read out the first problem… …Who wants to come over the blackboard to show to the class how you did it?’ The same pattern goes on. Some pupils raise their hands while some others seem to struggle. Katerina is staring at the teacher from time to time and looks as if she doesn’t really follow the instruction. For the time being, a boy is writing the solution
on the board while Mr. Antonis looks at him in admiration. Proudly Mr. Antonis turns his head to me by saying, ‘He is my best pupil in mathematics’. Then he turns back to him with a smile of content and raising his voice says, ‘Come on Giorgos, give us the correct answer, as you always do’… Overall, the teaching is conducted with a contribution from only a quarter of the pupils while the rest don’t take an active part in it. Katerina is completely cut off. She doesn’t say a word during the whole lesson. She only copies in her workbook the solutions from the board as many other pupils do. Mr. Antonis doesn’t seem ready or willing to engage everyone in the learning that is occurring.

In contrast to Mr. Antonis’s pedagogical approach, is Christina’s transformative pedagogy (see vignette 2). Rather unexpectedly, Christina teaches at the same school and the same class as Mr. Antonis. This, in itself, denotes the vital role of the mainstream classroom teacher in transforming the learning capacity of all their pupils. It also shows the complexity of inclusion and/or school improvement on a micro level; one school, one classroom, two teachers, two opposing pedagogies. Christina employs a collaborative learning approach which challenges the passive role of learners through the various projects she implements. She strongly believes that pupils’ learning capacity is limited by a narrow delivery model of curriculum and by a pedagogy that emphasises preset objectives, direct teaching and lack of pupil autonomy. Through her practice, she tries to create conditions that maximise her pupils’ learning capacity and engagement with the learning process. As stated earlier, Hart et al. (2004) note, within transformative instructional strategies the relation between present and the future is not reproduced. According to them the idea of transformability is defined as a firm conviction that things can change, and for the better, as a result of what happens in the present, in the daily interactions of teachers and pupils. It is really important for teachers to believe that there is the potential for all pupils to become better learners, and Christina is an example of such a teacher. The following vignette encapsulates her inclusive pedagogical practice.

Vignette 2 – Christina’s tailored approach

It is a native language (Greek) class at 7:45 in the morning. Pupils are asked to read out loud a paragraph so as to practise their reading skills. Especially in this classroom Christina places enormous emphasis on reading and writing skills as many pupils are not native Greek speakers. Furthermore, verbal communication is an important learning target. Christina poses some questions in respect to the text in order to generate a discussion that engages all pupils. She does so by asking very simple questions in the beginning so that everyone feels confident to answer. Maria, a female pupil from Russia who hardly speaks Greek, raises her hand and answers correctly but in poor Greek. Christina praises her by saying: ‘Well done Maria, this is spot on’. At the same time, Andreas complains about not understanding clearly what his classmate says. The teacher replies to the boy in the following way: ‘Andreas, Maria’s answer is correct. You all know that she is new to our school and our country and doesn’t speak very good Greek. This is totally natural. As you all noticed she is getting better and better. And I think if you pay a bit more
attention you will be able to understand everything she says’. In another instance, Katerina attempts to answer a question but she does so at a very slow pace. Again some pupils start to complain about wasting their time. At once Christina intervenes by stating: ‘We have to give time to our classmates to answer freely and without pressure. Everyone has their own tempo and we have to respect this’. On the whole, all children participate in the lesson as a result of Christina’s approach and the carefully planned activities according to the needs and interests of each pupil. For example, some pupils are encouraged to type their answers on the computer because, as the teacher explains, some of them don’t feel comfortable enough with their hand-writing. Moreover, she gives out a handout with simple activities which is appealing to all pupils. In a very discreet manner, she asks some pupils, Katerina included, to complete only the first three.

For the last 25 minutes of the lesson, Christina reminds pupils that they have to work on their environmental project. Everyone is getting very excited. As a pupil explains to me, their project is about generating collectively a multimedia story aiming at environmental issues. Pupils are working in groups. Some of them are on the computer recording their voice messages, inserting pictures from their digital camera while others are drawing on paper scenes of pollution and recycling. Katerina also looks excited while her voice is being recorded. Suddenly, everyone in the class seems not to be bothered about good syntax or mistakes in oral language. All pupils express themselves freely and unite their creativity for a collective task.

Currently, it seems that most of the teachers in this research do not share these kinds of beliefs and practices, resulting in ineffective teaching practices toward inclusive education. Their thinking is mainly based on judgements about individual learners, overlooking the external influences and constraints of the environment in pupils’ learning. In inclusive education though, the challenge for teachers is the quality of learning and participation of all pupils (Nind and Wearmouth, 2006). Thus, a key element of successful inclusion is the way teachers teach. Therefore, teachers need to have access to good information and knowledge in order to develop inclusive pedagogy (Christina’s Masters qualification). Despite the fact that in Cyprus there is a statutory requirement for mainstream schools to provide effective learning opportunities for all pupils, a potential barrier to providing these opportunities is still the faith in special procedures and approaches employed in special settings or by special teachers.

**Learning expectations**

The determinist values and beliefs of most of the teachers in the eight classes studied, result in the maintenance of very low or non-existent teachers’ learning expectations from pupils, identified as having special educational needs. Their only expectations are related to social aspects of inclusion, namely interacting with peers, making new friends if possible and so forth. When I questioned them whether these pupils could also be included academically within a mainstream class, there was a consensus amongst eight of the nine teachers interviewed. They all stated that it is only in a special support class that
these pupils can enhance their basic cognitive skills. And also that they can only progress academically up to a certain point, according to their individual potential.

Arguably, learning expectations or the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992), comprise a part of the hidden curriculum of schooling which plays a vital role in pupils’ learning. Hart et al. (2004) purport that pupils live up to, or down to, what they think is expected from them. This self-fulfilling prophecy is thus a significant determinant of learning for all pupils in a class. Therefore, it was not surprising that most pupils, identified as having special educational needs in this research, had somehow ‘given up’ their learning. Of course, this was not only due to the Pygmalion effect; however, it was clear that the learning capacity of these pupils had been heavily impaired. This raises further questions and concerns about their prospects and welfare after they have left school, which are outside of the immediate remit of this paper.

Notion of achievement within inclusion
Evidence from across the five schools suggests that teachers and parents of most children were concerned about overall classroom achievement within an inclusive framework. There was a basic argument that inclusion could not be compatible with high levels of pupils’ achievements. For example, a number of teachers suggested that some parents believed that inclusion had a detrimental effect on their own children’s learning and achievement. In one of the schools, some parents expressed their objection to inclusion and lobbied for concentrating, more or less, all pupils, identified as having special educational needs in one class. This is a class in a big urban school which has nineteen pupils, five of them identified as having special educational needs. These ‘fearful feelings’ were, to some extent, shared by many of the teachers too. They claimed that it was impossible to teach all pupils in a class that includes these pupils. This is also a ‘reason/excuse’ for maintaining low learning expectations and distributing the responsibility of educating these children to special support teachers.

Findings from other recent studies, however, do not seem to support these assumptions, although it is worth noting that there is no equivalent research in the Cypriot context. Hence, I draw on studies conducted in the English educational system, with regards to understandings of is not dissimilar to that in Cyprus. Black-Hawkins et al. (2007) present evidence suggesting that high levels of inclusion can be compatible with high level of student achievement. However, they acknowledge that this relationship in not straightforward. Furthermore, they argue that schools which aim to be increasingly supportive of both inclusion and achievement are more likely to be ‘dynamic problem solving organisations’ (p.120) rather than static. Along these lines, Farrell et al. (2007) have found that there is an insubstantial relationship between inclusion and academic achievement at the school level. Therefore, mainstream schools need not be concerned with the potentially negative impact on the overall academic achievements of their pupils due to the inclusion of pupils, classified as having special educational needs in mainstream classes.
Role of special support staff and classroom teachers’ training
Yet another critical pedagogical issue that has emerged from this study concerns the relationship between special support and classroom teachers, their respective role with respect to the education of pupils, identified as having special educational needs, and classroom teachers’ initial and in-service training.

Special support or mainstream classroom teachers
Whose ‘act of teaching’ (Alexander, 2004, p.11) is arguably a critical question concerning pedagogy. As described in all five schools, seven out of nine classroom teachers accepted no responsibility for educating pupils, identified as having special educational needs, in the mainstream class. They supported this stance by arguing that they were reliant on the ‘experts’ (special support teachers, speech therapists, psychologists and so forth) because they considered themselves to be pedagogically incompetent to address diversity in their classes. Further, they argued that this was partly due to inadequate initial and in-service training as well as scarcity of teaching time. This study suggests that Cypriot classroom teachers view pullout strategies, for example withdrawal, as the most popular type of support, while co-teaching rarely takes place. Vlachou-Balafouti and Zoniou-Sideris (2000) observe that the area of ‘special education’ has started to become a developing industry with the involvement of more professional groups such as special teachers, educational psychologists, speech therapists, counsellors, and so forth. A common characteristic of the newly introduced professions is their strong attachment to a medical approach towards learning problems. When the teaching of children, identified as having special educational needs is mainly based on a discourse of deficits and professionalism, there is a danger of reinforcing the assumption that these pupils belong to a different pedagogical category and thus cannot be taught by ordinary classroom teachers. These underlining assumptions were well supported and sustained across all five schools, with just a couple of minor exceptions.

I have to draw a line here between the expressed rhetoric and the actual practice of the nine teachers studied. Even though, the majority of them argued that collaborative pedagogical approaches in the mainstream class were the most effective in terms of enhancing the learning of all pupils, I only observed two of them actually deploying this approach in their classes. Although the majority of teachers across all five schools acknowledged the effectiveness of some teaching methods, for a number of reasons, such as lack of time, resources and perceived non-expertise, they did not put them into practice.

As has already been argued, teachers greatly emphasised the pedagogical role of the special support teacher. Inevitably, this view has several implications for practice. As Best (1991) advocates, this can result in the increased withdrawal of the child from the mainstream class for individualised support. However, continuous withdrawal of the child might cause additional problems, as described in previous sections. The child learns to be taught in isolation from his/her peers and he/she is excluded from stimulating activities taking place in the class (Nolan and Gersch, 1996). Furthermore he/she has a low status as a learner (UNESCO, 1993). Even in cases where the child is not withdrawn from the classroom, the ‘traditional’ support teacher as defined by Symeonidou (2002a)
is usually expected to provide one-to-one support for the child within the mainstream class. Indeed, this occurred in my research. In particular, in one school the teacher for the deaf was in the class in many instances to make sure that the three deaf pupils comprehended everything. Her role was to assist them by using sign language and clarifying, that way, the classroom teacher’s verbal instructions. On the one hand, this practice can be seen as helpful to the deaf pupils but, on the other, it reinforces prejudicial and other deterministic beliefs about the ability of these pupils to learn.

Either the support is provided within the mainstream or the special support class, this sounds attractive to some, especially parents, as it means that the child is entitled to an ‘extra’ teacher and this is expected to increase accessibility to the curriculum. It is worth noting here that some parents, according to teachers, deny terminating the special provision made to their child exactly for this reason. Even though, this traditional role of special support teachers seems appealing to many parents, it can be argued that there is a great necessity for them to engage new roles and try to re-consider their everyday teaching practices.

Despite the fact that cooperation between classroom and special support teachers is thought by many teachers and authors (Phtiaka, 1996; Symeonidou, 2002a; Thomas et al., 1998; Ainscow, 1999; Loreman et al., 2005) to be a highly important condition for the successful inclusion of pupils, identified as having special educational needs, in my research this cooperation is ill-served or barely takes place. This research provides two possible explanations for this. First, there is always the danger of respondents giving socially desirable answers in an interview setting. Second, has to do with issues of ‘practicability’ versus ‘rhetoric’. Even though, teachers considered cooperation as important, they did not employ it in their everyday teaching and practice. They argued that there was no time available for essential collaboration. Overall, all nine teachers mostly collaborated at a superficial level. This collaboration included practical issues, exchanging information and resources, and in some cases co-programming of certain lessons. This study suggests that the current professional relationship between classroom and special support teachers should be transformed radically.

Initial and in-service training of classroom teachers
According to the nine teachers who participated in this research, the most important condition that promotes inclusive pedagogy is the initial and in-service training of teaching staff. All of them highlighted the urgent need for in-service training. Generally, the teachers seemed not to feel qualified to teach children, identified as having special educational needs in their classrooms, and as a possible result of this there was an increased demand for specialised support.

These findings have several implications for practice and correspond to other studies’ findings. There is a need for in-service training for teachers in knowledge and skills required in inclusive settings. Christina (see vignette 2) is a sound example of the benefits of in-service training. Only after her Master’s studies in the field of special and inclusive education, had she realised the paramount important in-service training has in promoting inclusive practices. Several studies within a Cypriot context have identified this need for
both appropriate initial and in-service training (Angelides et al., 2004; Symeonidou, 2002a; Angelides, 2007). Angelides’s (2007) recent study highlights the importance of initial training in moving teachers towards more inclusive practices.

Studies in the USA (Buell et al., 1999) and the UK (Avramidis et al., 2000) tend to reinforce the view that ‘special education’ qualifications acquired from pre- and in-service courses are associated with less resistance to inclusive practices. Pre- and in-service training is considered an important factor in improving teachers’ attitudes towards the implementation of an inclusive policy (Shimman, 1990; Beh-Pajooh, 1992). Shimman’s and Beh-Pajooh’s findings have showed that college teachers who had been trained to teach students with learning difficulties express more favourable views and attitudes towards pupils identified as having special educational need rather than those who have had no such training. Likewise, Forlin (1995) concludes that ‘special education’ resource teachers tend to have a more positive attitude to inclusion than their mainstream counterparts. Avissar et al. (2003) conclude that initial and in-service training programmes should be implemented in order to address school personnel in more inclusive directions.

**Concluding comments**

Undoubtedly, pedagogy plays a key role in promoting the successful implementation of inclusive education. Findings across the five schools have clearly shown that teaching arrangements and pedagogical approaches, at the school and classroom level can enhance or impede the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs. Social relationships and social solidarity across the schools have been found to influence and be influenced by the pedagogy in each school. It has become apparent that pedagogy involves many interrelated and juxtaposing ramifications that have to be systemically organised in order to widen the participation, inclusion and learning of all pupils within the school. This paper has shed only some light on how official educational policies and prescribed national curriculum for primary schools shape and are shaped by the values and practices of teachers, pupils and parents. Moreover, the role of special support teachers in conjunction with their relationship to classroom teachers was examined. Finally, the initial and in-service training of teachers is seen as a fundamental condition to overcome many of the barriers of exclusive pedagogy.

This paper supports that inclusion should be seen as a grass-root and ongoing process to improving schools and, in extend, improving society. Pedagogy should be at the heart of this process. Data suggested that there is a dynamic relationship between pedagogy and the social status of pupils, identified as having special educational needs. Moreover, it has been argued that different teachers in different or even same contexts conceive inclusion differently. Nevertheless, the values of teachers have been found to shape their everyday teaching arrangements and pedagogical approaches. In this prism, inclusion in education may be seen as a process of putting values into action, as Ainscow et al. (2006) argue. Thus, inclusion and pedagogy should go hand in hand to raise social acceptance, participation and achievement and actively combat social exclusion, stigmatisation, marginalisation and academic under-achievement.
References


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