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# Promoting social interaction in the inclusive classroom: Lessons from inclusive schools in England and Cyprus

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## ABSTRACT

Recent sociometric research evidence in mainstream settings has suggested that pupils identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) often occupy a lower social position compared to their typically achieving peers and they tend to be lonely and marginalised. This is often attributed to their lacking of skills needed to engage socially with classmates in order to develop social relationships and friendships. Some studies have found that particular teaching arrangements such as cooperative learning activities and wider pedagogical practices can be conducive to promoting the social inclusion of pupils identified as having SEN. In this paper, we draw on evidence from two recent studies conducted in England and Cyprus which combined sociometric techniques ascertaining the social position of pupils accredited with SEN with in-depth interviews with practitioners and pupils as well as observations. By combining the insights gained from two different contexts, we formulate an open list of pedagogical strategies and wider school practices for promoting social interaction and ultimately the social inclusion of all children.

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## 1. Introduction – Literature review

The main objective of this paper is to present an open list of pedagogical strategies and wider school practices that promote social interaction and inclusion of all children in teaching and learning. In doing so, we draw on comparative data collected from two research studies in England and Cyprus.

One of the main arguments for inclusion is the social benefits pupils accredited with Special Educational Needs (SEN) gain from their increased interaction with typically achieving peers. While this assumption is often taken for granted, the results emerging from relevant empirical studies are very mixed. For example, Lindsay's (2007) review on the social effects of inclusion on pupils accredited with SEN found few differences between children educated in special schools and those in mainstream provision. Of the 16 different studies identified, 2 were positive (positive effects of inclusion), 2 were positive with some caveats, 8 showed no differences and 4 were negative. Similarly, Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) found 1 study with positive results, 2 with positive results with some caveats, 6 that showed no differences and 4 with negative results. However, it could be argued that an inherent methodological limitation of these studies concerns the matching and contrasting of different samples in different settings.

Other studies have investigated the social position of pupils identified as having SEN solely within mainstream education. What has been consistently reported in this line of research is that integrated pupils with SEN are less accepted and more rejected

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by their mainstream classmates (Larrivee & Horne, 1991; Vaughn, Elbaum, & Schumm, 1996). For example, an American study by Pavri and Luftig (2000), found that 11-year-old pupils with learning disabilities in inclusive provision were less popular than those without learning impairments and they experienced more loneliness. Additionally, even where children with SEN seem to be accepted by their peers, their social status remains significantly poorer. For example, in a meta-analysis of 17 sociometric studies conducted in the US between 1978 and 1991, pupils identified with SEN had significantly reduced social status compared to their mainstream peers (Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995). In another meta-analysis Nowicki (2003) also concluded that these children have a less favourable social position in their classroom and experience more social difficulties than their average to high-achieving peers. What is worrying is that similar findings have been reported across different national school systems including the UK (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993), Holland (Koster, Pijl, Nakken, & Van Houten, 2010), Norway (Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008), Spain (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003) and Israel (Tur-Kaspa, Margalit, & Most, 1999). Of even greater concern is the evidence suggesting that social status tends to be fairly stable throughout the school years (Kuhne & Wiener, 2000). Similar findings are yielded in Cyprus. For example, Mamas (2012) has argued that pupils identified as having SEN within mainstream primary education maintain a considerably lower social status than their peers and are more likely to remain excluded and marginalised from teaching and learning.

One explanation for the less prominent social status of some pupils accredited with SEN could be that they lack the necessary social skills to successfully bond with their peers. Indeed, a recent German study by Mand (2007) showed that children with behavioural difficulties were less popular with other students, had lower sociometric status, and were more often rejected by their typically achieving peers (see also De Monchy, Pijl, & Zandberg, 2004). Similar problems are experienced by pupils with autism (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007) and to a lesser extent by pupils with mild intellectual disabilities. Conversely, pupils with motor impairments tend to experience fewer problems in their social contacts since their peers find their disability easier to understand and accept (Laws & Kelly, 2005).

Given the well-documented problems that pupils accredited with SEN experience in their interactions with typically achieving peers, it is imperative that schools and individual teachers take a more active role in facilitating social interactions in class. For example, research has shown that this can be indirectly achieved through mixed co-operative learning activities (Gartin, Murdick, & Digby, 1992; Nind & Wearmouth, 2006). However, as we will observe through the findings of the two studies reported here, some activities that are specifically designed to foster the acceptance and social participation of pupils at risk of isolation can be very effective, and should be an integral part of broader school practice. This evidence is in line with recent theorising in the field about the importance of developing an inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Kershner, 2009), whereby teachers focus on supporting the learning and social development of all pupils rather than concentrating on narrowly defined individual needs.

## 2. The state of inclusive education in England and Cyprus

Although the promotion of an inclusive education system has been high on the UK government's agenda, many commentators in the field (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009; Lindsay, 2007) have argued, that the relevant policy initiatives suffered from confusion and contradiction. Specifically, the premises that children accredited with SEN should “wherever possible be educated in the mainstream school” and that inclusion should be promoted “where parents want it and appropriate support can be provided” contained in policy documents (DfES, 2004) created confusion over whether ‘inclusion’ refers to all or simply most students. Unsurprisingly then, the imperative for inclusion has resulted in a variety of interpretations and applications across different Local Authorities (LAs). This variety is vividly illustrated in the statistics released by the Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (Rustemier & Vaughan, 2005) which revealed disturbing variations in placement across England: In 2004 pupils with statements of SEN in South Tyneside were 24 times more likely to receive a segregated education than those in the London Borough of Newham. A critical view of this continuing variation between LAs might suggest that despite the government's rhetoric on inclusion, the operation of special schools as part of a spectrum of provision will most likely be retained.

A similar commitment to promoting inclusive education is evident in Cyprus. This can be traced in the 1999 Education Act for Children with Special Needs (MEC, 1999) and its subsequent guidance on the implementation of the legislation (MEC, 2001) which established the right of all children to be educated in their neighbouring regular school alongside their peers. Within the Cypriot legislation, the definition of Special Educational Needs is remarkably similar to England; that is, a child is accredited with SEN if they experience significantly greater learning difficulties than their peers and have difficulties that constrain or exclude them from utilising the educational facilities provided in a mainstream school. According to the 1999 Act, children identified as having SEN are entitled to special educational provision which can be provided in either a mainstream or a special setting. This is due to the dual model of provision currently operating in Cyprus.

Integrated pupils with severe learning difficulties are offered two forms of provision. First, pupils with specific syndromes such as autism and Down's syndrome as well as those with complex needs (e.g. brain disorders and severe mental delay) are placed in special units located in the school site. These children mostly share a common playground during break time, attend assemblies and are expected to shape some basic social relationships with peers and be accepted and respected. Thus, there is only locational and, in some cases, hope for social integration or inclusion. By contrast, pupils who experience learning difficulties of a more moderate nature (currently the largest portion of pupils accredited with SEN) are accommodated in the mainstream class but are regularly withdrawn for individualised learning support in a resource room. This support is provided by a special support teacher or a specialist such as a speech therapist (Symeonidou, 2002).

### 3. Methodology

The English study sought to offer a thorough evaluation of the social impacts of inclusion on a sample of 566 pupils (of which 101 with SEN) drawn from seven primary schools in the North of England. The selection of these schools was informed by the number of children accredited with SEN and the range of impairments present in their registers. These schools represented different localities within the LA and were all committed to implementing inclusion as evidenced in their policies and, more importantly, in their recent inspection (Ofsted) reports. It is worth noting that the selected schools were drawn from a predominantly white middle-class LA, and therefore, could be regarded as fairly homogeneous 'clusters' in the sense of catering for children of the same ethnic and socio-economic background. Had the study been conducted in a multicultural area, the ethnic dimension would have been a significant factor affecting the children's process of socialisation.

The study sought to ascertain the social position occupied by pupils accredited with SEN within their classroom network and to elicit evidence about the nature of their social interaction and participation in peer groups. A multi-method research design was adopted consisting of sociometric techniques applied in short interviews with all participating pupils combined with qualitative fieldwork; the latter involved observations and interviews with 27 teachers aiming to elicit their views about their pupils' social interactions and their preferred teaching strategies and practices in relation to inclusion.

The Cyprus study aimed to explore the social interactions and contacts of pupils accredited with SEN in five mainstream primary schools by eliciting pupils' and teachers' perspectives. The particular schools were selected purposefully as they had all developed towards an inclusive direction. In all schools, the needs of pupils accredited with SEN were met predominantly in the mainstream class and withdrawal for additional support was minimal. In this respect, these schools offered an opportunity to examine inclusion in action. Special care was taken to ensure that the selected schools represented both urban and rural areas. The study not only sought to ascertain the social position of pupils accredited with SEN but, more importantly, to gain insights about the processes leading to the formation of pupils' particular social status. A mixed-method approach was employed encompassing a sociometric technique with observations and interviews with pupils and teachers. In total, 146 pupils (16 identified as having SEN) across 8 classes within the five schools participated in the sociometric phase of the study, while interviews were conducted with 40 pupils and 9 teachers.

Data across both studies were analysed by employing sociometric classification procedures. Thematic analysis was implemented to organise and analyse qualitative data from the interviews with teachers and pupils. Extracts and quotations from teachers and pupils are presented in order to remain as close as possible to the voices of participants.

### 4. Findings

The sociometric findings provided a 'snapshot' of the social interactions and contacts of pupils identified as having SEN with their peers. In line with previous research, in both studies children accredited with SEN received fewer nominations than their typically achieving peers. As a result of that, in both studies they maintained a low sociometric status within their class networks. These findings are in conflict with the primary justification for inclusion within the two countries; that is, the promotion of social inclusion of pupils identified as having SEN. The section continues with outlining the identified elements of inclusive pedagogy in the two contexts.

#### 4.1. Insights gained from the English study

The study identified those pro-social strategies and wider pedagogical and school practices employed in the participating schools that were conducive to the promotion of social interaction between pupils accredited with SEN and their peers. These insights derived from interviewing professionals and pupils as well as assessing relevant evidence gathered from the sociometric part of the study. The range of inclusion oriented practices reported by individual teachers participating in the study were contingent on:

- Teachers' understanding of inclusive education and their perceived barriers to its implementation.
- Each school's 'ethos' and associated practices on inclusion.
- The level of support received from the Local Authority.

The study included fieldwork in two schools that operated specialist Units on their site. Taking the above three points in mind, it was clear from the interviews that many teachers thought that the social participation of the pupils in the Units was hindered by their partial integration rather than full inclusion into the school. Beyond that, since the schools had a long tradition of operating those Units, a predominance of 'deficit' and integrative rather than inclusionist approaches was observed in the teachers' attitudes towards the children in the Unit. A teacher said:

'...if there's a little group from the Speech and Language Centre that are in the classroom, they tend to stick together because they're in the Unit together...and...it's almost easier sometimes to let them be together because they know how to respond to their friend from the unit and they know...and it's sometimes easier to manage the work for them as well...but I mean, sometimes that defeats the object of them coming into the mainstream classroom'.

Therefore, as a general observation, it could be argued that the operation of specialist provision within mainstream sites is not conducive to the social participation of pupils accredited with SEN since they are not full members of the mainstream class.

Beyond that, however, teachers' comments also supported the view that consciously mixing and pairing pupils accredited with SEN and their peers in cooperative learning, creative, or game activities help their social interaction and enhance their self concept. Some of the teachers noted:

'I do masses with these kids to get them to become full members of our school community in terms of working with friendship groups, setting friendship groups when they're gone so that they've got people in the other classes they can relate to...certainly a lot on the social side of inclusion...again it's mixing them, getting them together and working together, at my children and mainstream class...mainstream children...having them involved in things like running the school book fair, so that they're actually doing something that's integral to the school and which has kudos but which also...it's inclusive in that it's part of the school but they've got a responsibility within it which is...as I say, has the kudos...'

'...lining up with other children and trying to intervene with other children when they're playing games, throwing and catching a ball with another child, they'll just need to be...and not just the teacher...sitting down next to the children, obviously when they're trying to integrate in a group...I mean lots of different ways socially...erm...you know, being in the class they just do sit near each other and we obviously try to make sure that they're sitting near each other and next to each other...and the intervener obviously working as somebody who just intervenes that conversation...'

'...we play a game [...] at the moment called Sin Cities, and the children have the option whether or not to be put into groups randomly or they choose. They always choose it randomly and I pull the names out of a hat, and that's it. It's interesting, you look at those groups and sometimes those children have never ever spoken to each other throughout the time in this class and yet all of a sudden they are talking to each other'.

The analysis revealed a strong perceived link between participation in social groups or friendship clusters and the social characteristics of 'leader' and 'athletic'. The teacher and pupil accounts supported the view that structured sport, game, or creative activities, offering all (SEN/non-SEN) children the opportunity to assume the role of a leader or team player enhance their self-concept and aid their social development. Many pupils themselves reported in their interviews that they made friends by joining in with other children playing games or sport, or through pursuing creative and other interests outside school; and many teachers suggested that pupils accredited with SEN who may not be academically strong were able to enhance their self-concept through excelling in other areas and through the positive feedback, support and encouragement of their teachers as evidenced in the following teacher accounts:

'[...] we try and find other things for those children with special needs to be good at...so, you know, we've got a girls' football match tonight and the girl in goal is probably the weakest academically in year 6 but actually she's renowned as a dancer and a sportsman, so she has other ways of excelling then...'

'Predominantly we've always taken like 99.9% of boys in this Dyslexia Unit but we took a little girl many years ago and we were doing Macbeth...Now, all the children get included in every play we do but obviously Macbeth is quite difficult...and Lucy, she was, she was a lovely little girl, she came and she said 'Could I...?'...cause I had split lady Macbeth, it was such a big part, so I split them into three...so she said 'Can I play one of the lady Macbeths'...phew...Leave it with me, I'll have a word with Mrs. X'...and I sat down with her TA and said 'How's she going to take on...?'...and the TA worked with her and... My God, what a performance! Absolutely outstanding and of course, I mean...I had...my eyes were filling up on the night when she did it...and I just wanted to stand up, 'cause when the concert finished, I thought [clapping]...I thought 'Bastards, stand up, cheer and shout, that little girl's dyslexic and she's done that herself', you know...'

'Far far more accepted, I think...it's another one of these things that...find something he's good at, you know, he's played in the football team, he's a very good rugby player, he's very good at athletics...and he's actually very good in class, you know...any issues we've had this year with him have been outside, you know, tiny little things really...[laughing]...There were times when we've had to sort of rein him in a bit; cause we told him he's that good, I think he's believed the hype so much...but in a way we have really forced that because I think a lot of these children don't get that at home, they don't get anywhere at home, there's no one telling them that 'That's a fantastic bit of writing', so...he's got to...it's worked really well...'

Specific school practices and wider inclusive approaches aimed at including pupils regardless of severity and type of need were observed in schools with an explicit commitment to the inclusion agenda. A list of those which teachers and pupils have found useful is offered here:

- *Sensitivity training for peers*: discussing prejudice and discussing the needs of children with SEN in the school with the other pupils (if parents agree to it) and providing peers with the communication and other skills needed to interact successfully with children with SEN in class and in the playground.

'It's amazing that they're very accommodating, once they know that this child, perhaps just needs a bit more space, needs not to be sort of touched without being asked, you know, needs to be spoken to in a calm way; and if you just

introduce all these strategies that we use ourselves, then the children are very-very accommodating, and that's very successful...'.<sup>1</sup>

'We try, if a child has severe needs then I will try and do a session with the children...bring probably the school nurse in to discuss with the children the nature of the child's needs and the problems. Because I think until class understands what that child can and can't do and why they find it difficult, they are quite scared to communicate with the child [...]. When they understand they are much more likely to go and talk to the child and feel comfortable because it is like adults isn't it? If you don't know what is the matter with somebody it is very difficult to go and communicate with them because you are a little bit nervous and it is a natural human response, I think. But the moment they understand, and I have seen it happen, we had a child with cerebral palsy and we didn't do it until year five, I think, and the moment we did it, it was like a light was switched on for the rest of the class. And they would go in and ask him questions and he was quite happy to answer and sometimes we had the parent there as well because sometimes it may have been something that happened at birth so the parent could talk about that and the children like to hear. It makes them feel much more calm and comfortable about it and that improves the communication with the child because maybe they understand. That is for children with complex needs'.

- *Peer mentoring*: Children are assigned to help and play with children with SEN during playtime and structured game activities.

'I do I have a little boy whose got slight problems [...] he's weak on some things, organisational skills and he has a mentor that he works with which has been great. It's built his confidence...he's also built up some qualities in the other boy, which the parents are pleased to see, and their friendship has developed outside school'.

- *Friendship schemes*: schemes that encourage pupils themselves to take responsibility for including those who feel left out (such as the 'Buddy Bench' or 'Buddy Post' scheme, where children take turns to look out for anyone sitting on their own on the Buddy Bench, and make sure they have someone to talk to and play with).
- *Out-of-class adult-led groups*: consisting of the same pupils from different years and units getting to know each other within that all-inclusive structure (e.g. the 'Family Groupings' scheme, where a teacher would gather the same pupils from different classes into an assembly or a chat; or Circle Time; and the 'Lunch Bunch' scheme where volunteers come into school and take a small number of children at a time out at lunchtime to enhance their self-esteem).

'I think it's the same with Circle Time as well, they sit in a circle and then [we] mix them up and say, 'Right you two talk to each other'. Circle of friends [is] really interesting because the dynamics of them are unbelievable, and they change sometimes hourly. I think [...] that I see myself as a facilitator to develop groups as well. Keeping existing friends but providing opportunities to create new friends and new clusters'.

- *Teacher-led creative activities*: such as all-inclusive collaborative story building, where each child in turn advances the story or picture painting or musical improvisation. Such activities could form part of a structured lesson (e.g. in Literacy Hour) or part of teacher-led structured games.
- *Communication and social skills training*: Dedicated time towards skills necessary to communicate with adults and socialise with other children within accepted social norms. It is notable that such training could benefit all children regardless of SEN accreditation/status.

'...cause sometimes obviously children in the mainstream classes they have difficulties themselves with behaviour and we can sort of...we do a lot of very specific social interaction training with our children on Monday afternoons – a whole afternoon when we do that – and we're teaching them over skills to use when they're outside, or when they're playing games, or when they're in class...you know...even things as basic as manners and, you know, how to sort of say 'Can I play with you?'; 'cause not all of our children have those skills readily available...' [...] so it could be something emotional, skills, it could be play skills, it could be things like understanding language and in the sense of idioms or somebody says something to you like 'Get your skates on', are they going to understand what that means at that tone that's used and it doesn't mean literally 'Get your skates on', so addressing those sort of misunderstandings that can happen... [...] I think we underestimate sometimes that children do need very overt teaching sometimes of essential skills – that they're not just going to have them naturally, you know, they need, sort of...all the sort of social niceties that just help them along, they need to be taught...'.<sup>2</sup>

'They've probably all got 'needs'... I wouldn't say [I use] SEN [strategies] necessarily – there's one boy isn't on the SEN register but he does have particular problems in making friends, keeping friends, that sort of thing so...so they play a lot of kind of games, social interaction games, how to cope with success, failure, those sorts of things, how to learn to play by rules...so they do an awful lot of work with the children that we identify that needs specific sort of support of that kind and anything else. It's more a social kind of intervention than it is an academic one, although a spin off of course is, if the children can make friends, they can learn how to play, they can learn how to work, then they can progress academically as well'.



#### 4.2. Insights gained from the Cyprus study

The study has identified a number of practices across the five schools in terms of promoting or inhibiting the social interactions and inclusion of pupils identified as having SEN. It has to be noted that many similarities across the two countries have been recorded. Social interactions and contacts between these pupils identified as having SEN and their peers were found to be primarily influenced by their *teachers' pedagogy* along with their *values and beliefs* towards inclusion. These beliefs were, in turn, largely shaped by the 'integrationist' rather than 'inclusive' provision of all five schools. In other words, the operation of support classes and/or special units within the mainstream where pupils identified as having SEN often spend significant amount of time, led many teachers to rely heavily on such provision thus neglecting the social and substantive aspects of their teaching arrangements. This is particularly true within special units where students spend most of their school day at along with classmates who have the same or highly similar special educational needs or disabilities. By contrast, some teachers appeared to hold positive attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion hence assuming responsibility for the education of all pupils in their class.

A common finding across all five schools was that the operation of the special support classroom inhibits social interaction and promotes marginalisation and stigmatisation. Overall, this practice has been described by teachers as 'exclusive' but 'necessary'. Teachers in Cyprus share similar concerns with their English colleagues. A teacher said:

'... Even though withdrawing a child to the special support classroom is necessary, it automatically excludes this child from the mainstream classroom. It is rather peculiar the way inclusive education operates. For me, this practice is another form of micro-exclusion within the mainstream school...'

Inevitably, this practice limits the scope for social interaction even more and reinforces exclusion. However, teachers insisted that the special support classroom is the only place that 'special needs children' can develop their learning. They seemed to be in favour of the academic development of these children and thought that marginalisation was a 'necessary sacrifice'.

An alternative approach to this was the 'co-teaching approach' that was implemented in one of the schools. Co-teaching implied that the special support teacher would come into the mainstream classroom and teach alongside the main teacher so to avoid pupils accredited with SEN to leave the classroom. When describing this approach a teacher said:

'...To organise the whole thing takes time and requires planning. However, it is very useful as children with special needs don't have to leave the classroom. I am not sure if they learn more this way but at least they avoid the stigma of being the 'children of the special education' in the eyes of their classmates...'

The way mainstream classroom teachers teach has also been found to be related to the social status and participation. Antonis, a deputy headteacher in his early fifties, received his initial teacher training more than three decades ago. Since then he has not obtained any other formal qualifications apart from some in-service training programmes and seminars. In a discussion, he argues:

For the past few years more and more children have special needs. I didn't know about the introduction of the 1999 Education Act you just told me about. That's why I also didn't know about the case of Katerina (child with identified SEN). Of course, I realised that she has severe difficulties in learning as some other pupils in this class. To be honest with you, even if I knew I don't think that I could do anything about it. I don't feel that I have the necessary skills as a teacher to deal with pupils with special needs. I think she has to attend more the special support class if she is about to learn something. As you noticed yourself in the mainstream classroom, she cannot keep up with the lesson's pace and there is nothing I can do about it. There are so many other pupils in the class that I have to teach. The whole class just can't go off track because of one or two pupils. I have to deliver the teaching material set out by the Ministry. This is what I have been doing for thirty years now and this is what parents expect from me.

Christina, a teacher that works in the same school and teaches in this class has chosen a different approach to teaching and learning which promotes the social interaction and learning of all pupils. For example, she involved all pupils in an environmental project. During an observation of a session, she asked her pupils to get ready for their project. Immediately, everyone got very excited. As a pupil explained to me, their project was about generating collectively a multimedia story aiming at environmental issues. Pupils were observed working in groups and helping each other to achieve their specific tasks. Some of them were on the computer recording their voice messages, inserting pictures from their digital camera while others were drawing on paper scenes of pollution and recycling. Katerina also looked very excited while her voice was being recorded. Everyone in the classroom seemed not to be bored and was fully enjoying the project activities. All pupils expressed themselves freely and united their creativity for a collective task.

Even though Christina and Antonis work in the same school and teach in the same class with the same pupils, under the same conditions, their teaching strategies and approaches are different and rather contradictory. Christina tends towards more inclusive approaches, while Antonis's approach could be characterised as being more 'chalk and talk', and less flexible. For example, Christina tries to engage all pupils in the instruction and learning by adjusting the learning goals, curriculum and teaching strategies. This in turn increases opportunities for all children to engage in meaningful social interactions within the classroom and subsequently outside of it. Antonis is primarily concerned with delivering the set curriculum, focusing on those

pupils who can follow the lesson's pace without any modifications or adaptations of his teaching. These two examples of teachers are revealing of how far their pedagogy and values and beliefs about inclusion can influence the social and learning development of pupils and, in particular, that of Katerina.

Christina makes an effort to provide opportunities for all pupils to participate in the lesson by modifying the curriculum, learning targets and materials. Her approach is also inspired and driven by social justice perspectives. For example, she considers that all pupils should have equal educational opportunities in order to achieve their higher potential and feel welcome within the school community. These values and beliefs are embedded into her practice by giving opportunities to all pupils to participate. In the interview, she points out:

I feel that I did what every teacher should do. But I know this is difficult. I've been teacher for thirteen years but only recently I have changed my view around educating children identified as having special educational needs. This has happened because of my postgraduate degree in inclusive education. Before this degree I couldn't really see the value of including these pupils the mainstream school... ..With respect to Katerina, I believe that she can easily participate in the learning. We all, as a class, have to work hard to achieve the acceptance of all pupils by their peers. ...The environment project we are working on, as you probably noticed, is a great success. Well, I try to be imaginative but it takes time. My reward though is that pupils and especially Katerina look happy and excited in such activities.

Pupils themselves seemed to be keen on such activities as they articulated in the interviews:

'...What I really like in this project is the use of the computer to record my voice and when acting as a journalist myself to record the voice of my classmates. It doesn't feel like I'm in a lesson during the time of the project'.

[Christos, 9 years old]

'...I like working with my classmates in this project. Whenever I find a difficulty I ask for help and they are always very supportive. I also like the fact that we can freely walk around the classroom'.

[Panayiota, 9 years old]

'...It doesn't feel like a normal class but we learn so many things about protecting the environment'.

[Marios, 9 years old]

Another good practice that has been found to have an important link to increasing social interaction and participation is the peer mentoring/tutoring approach in and out of the classroom. This approach was particularly observed and implemented across one of the schools. For example, in a Maths' session, Maria (child identified as having SEN) found it hard to participate and interact with the rest of her classmates. Stelios, the classroom teacher, has asked Georgia to assist Maria with her work (a hand-out was given to all pupils). Georgia did so with pleasure and the two of them seemed to get along well.

When discussing the above peer tutoring approach with Stelios, he argued that this was a way for him to overcome time restrictions to support Maria and other pupils individually. Furthermore, he emphasised problems with the curriculum, which he described as 'rigid' and 'difficult'. From the peer-tutor's point of view, helping out classmates was quite enjoyable and beneficial to both sides. Georgia (acting as tutor) noted in a follow-up interview: 'I usually complete my assignments very quickly and have nothing to do. Helping out my classmates who are a bit 'slow' is a way to fill in my spare time and of course I'm happy when offering help to children that need it.' This approach can be characterised as collaborative as pupils have a certain task and they work together in order to accomplish it. Within this framework, pupils like Maria can collaborate more comfortably with a peer rather than with the teacher. The setting is less formal and, as has been observed, Maria solved all of the first five exercises with Georgia's guidance and without the teacher's attention. Overall, peer tutoring, when used properly, can provide social and academic gains for both tutors and tutees, as accomplished in this classroom.

## 5. Bringing the evidence together: Discussion and implications

Both studies reported in this paper reveal a number of practices that are conducive to the social participation and inclusion of pupils identified as having SEN. In doing so, some practices that inhibit social interaction and contact are also presented. There are some common themes emerging from both countries. However, there are also lessons to be shared. According to Florian and Kershner (2009), inclusive pedagogy does not deny individual differences among students but suggests that such differences do not have to be construed as problems inherent within learners that are outside the expertise of classroom teachers. They note that it is not unusual for teachers to consider themselves as unable to deal with pupils identified as having special or having additional needs. Florian and Kershner also argue that the elements of inclusive pedagogy spread beyond individual classrooms to include beliefs, values and decision-making processes evident in the wider contexts of school and society. Finally, they maintain that knowledge develops through shared activity in social contexts and by working in collaborative and strategic ways.

Along these lines, Howe and Mercer (2008) point out that social interactions and collaborative learning activities among children in class can provide valuable, complementary and distinctive opportunities for learning and conceptual development. Furthermore, they challenge the traditional view in which talk and social interactions among children are viewed as irrelevant, if not disruptive to learning. It is apparent that social interactions and contacts with peers are of paramount importance in shaping



children's social development and learning. In turn, social development influences patterns of interaction, which in extent influence learning, thinking and social development itself (Howe & Mercer, 2008). Subsequently, learning within the primary classroom should be organised in ways that promote effective peer interaction and collaborative pupil learning. Both studies have presented evidence to suggest that pedagogy is likely to play a key role in enhancing or impeding both the social and academic development of pupils.

A great number of reviews have been carried out to examine effective pedagogical approaches and teaching arrangements in the context of inclusion and participation. Hegarty (1993), who reviewed the characteristics of effective integration programmes, has placed emphasis on curriculum adaptations, team teaching and on the adaptability of the mainstream school. Overall, Norwich and Lewis (2001) indicated that there is little evidence to support the use of a particular pedagogy for each type of special educational need. Along these lines, Florian and Kershner (2009) argue that there is a tendency in the education literature to fragment knowledge about effective teaching and/or reduce it to generic recipes. For example, teaching approaches that are matched to the apparently unique characteristics of an individual or particular 'categories' of pupils, such as pupils identified as having Down syndrome. Nind and Wearmouth (2006) argue that peer group interactive and holistic approaches are found to be more effective in educating all pupils, not only those who have been identified as having special educational needs. This is in agreement with the findings of both studies.

Nind and Wearmouth's (2006) review of the characteristics of effective inclusive approaches reveals a number of very useful ideas. They have identified three principle characteristics, namely: (i) all the teaching approaches involve an understanding of the pupil as an active agent in the construction of personal knowledge and of all pupils as capable of learning; (ii) the learning environment plays a key role as pupils learn through social interactions; (iii) there is recognition that a sense of belonging to, and participation in, the learning community has an important effect on pupils' learning in schools. Their review also highlights the great potential for the peer group to support the achievement and progress of all pupils including those identified as having special educational needs. Teachers foster the co-construction of knowledge through scaffolding by, and dialogue with, peers. Co-construction in the studies under review takes the form of peer-led discussion groups, careful questioning of pupils and focusing on social cognition and behaviours.

The views of skill acquisition that underpin the reviewed studies tend to be holistic and related to their application to the real-world context (Nind & Wearmouth, 2006). It has to be clarified here that the collective research evidence suggests that the social and academic dimensions are integrally linked. Peer group interactive approaches that have positive outcomes and are presented here address both the social and academic elements of supporting learning. Indeed, the relationship between social and academic dimensions is not always straightforward but in general the studies show the advantages of peer group interactive learning approaches that are multifaceted. Cooperative learning has been reported (Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004) as vital in addressing both the social and academic development of all pupils. It encompasses a range of teaching practices and the evidence base relates to the elements of social grouping/teamwork, the roles of group members, revising and adapting the curriculum and working within a cooperative learning school ethos. Overall, the studies indicate that attention to community and classroom participation should not be at the expense of attention to curriculum-related teaching and learning.

Accordingly, both studies aimed to raise awareness among teachers and help them realise that the learning capacity of a pupil is a product of the interplay between external forces and internal resources and states of mind. Hart, Drummond, and McIntyre (2007) describe some of the external forces that have an impact on learning capacity, including prescribed curriculum content, management styles, modes of grouping, expectations of teachers and peers, range and distribution of learning tasks and opportunities. Teachers should be convinced that they have the power to strengthen and transform learning capacity by acting systematically to lift limits on learning, such as fixed ability teaching and deterministic beliefs about learning, to expand and enhance learning opportunities and to create conditions that encourage all pupils to use the opportunities available to them more fully. As Hart et al. (2007) illustrate, some practical instructional strategies would be to increase flexibility, to make learning more pertinent to the world outside school and to increase the learner's control so as to strengthen the learning capacity of everybody.

In this way, it is possible to challenge the individual/deficit accounts of special educational needs. Goldbart (1994) reminds us how deficit thinking both disempowers teachers and impacts on the development of pupils classified as having special educational needs. As with ability labelling, deficit thinking produces a sense of powerlessness and fatalism on the part of teachers: a sense that there is not much that can be done because the limits on learning imposed from within are unalterable (Hart et al., 2007). This study purports that educational difficulties have to be seen as being context bound, arising out of the interaction of individual children with a particular educational programme at a certain moment of time (Ainscow, 1999).

Hart et al. (2007) argue that fixed ability and deficit thinking go hand in hand, both calling for constant vigilance if their damaging effects are to be progressively eliminated from educational practice. In a previous work, Hart (2000) has provided the ground for a free-from-deterministic belief pedagogy, by proposing a framework for innovative thinking that teachers should employ in teaching. According to Hart, the basis of this framework is the particular reading or interpretation of classroom events which leads teachers to feel puzzled, concerned or keen to give further thought to some particular aspect of the situation. Hart also acknowledges the interrelation between children's thinking and understanding and their social and emotional worlds. The social dimensions of children's experience she argues, cannot be overlooked if teachers are to understand pupils' responses to teaching and other aspects of school life.

Accordingly, Mittler (2000) suggests that what is needed is a change of mind-set and values for schools and for society as a whole. In line with that is the revised *Index for Inclusion* in which educational inclusion is defined as the 'processes of increasing participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of local schools' (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Florian and Kershner (2009) point out that the development of inclusive pedagogy involves day-to-day decisions

in school, using the many resources which are available. From a sociocultural perspective, they argue that inclusive pedagogy is best seen as a strategic process which focuses on supporting the processes of children's learning, motivation and social interaction, rather than primarily on identifying special needs, differentiating work and providing additional resources and support. Finally, they propose a combination of teaching strategies in order to promote inclusive pedagogy. It is on these grounds this study suggests a radical transformation of teachers' instructional strategies so as to generate an inclusive ethos and culture free from determinist beliefs.

## 6. Conclusion

Both studies provided insights as to the way pupils identified as having SEN interact socially within mainstream settings. Evidence from England and Cyprus suggests that the role of pedagogy and teaching arrangements is important in promoting inclusion and social interactions. A set of practical pedagogical strategies has been highlighted towards this direction. Furthermore, a lot can be done outside of the classroom so to increase the participation of all pupils in group games and other activities. The findings reported in this paper have multiple implications in the everyday actualisation of inclusion in both English and Cypriot contexts.

Even though, there is an enormous value in comparative studies there are limitations too. For example, the use of terminology can be contentious across different countries and educational settings. In particular, the term inclusion might be perceived in slightly different ways. Also, translation issues might be a problem during the data collection and analysis. A number of techniques were adopted to tackle this issue but this is still a potential limitation of the study.

Overall, this paper has drawn on data collected from schools in England and Cyprus. The analysis suggests that pupils identified as having SEN engage in less social interactions than their peers and this is due to a number of reasons, primarily the general school's 'ethos' regarding inclusion, pedagogical reasons, teachers' beliefs and values towards inclusion and other. In principal, both studies have searched for and highlighted 'goodness' rather than 'pathology' in the participating schools, aiming to share with practitioners the lessons learned from both contexts. This study has presented data to suggest that the role of teachers is critical in developing more inclusive pedagogical practice for all children in mainstream settings, including those who have been identified as having SEN. However, more research is needed to examine the dynamic relationship between inclusive pedagogy and social inclusion.

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