

SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND ADMINISTRATION

Including pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in primary school: Strategies and Approaches

By

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Including pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in primary school: Strategies and Approaches

Dissertation

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Περίληψη

Οι μαθησιακές δυσκολίες είναι ένας πολύπλοκος και πολύπλευρος τομέας στην έρευνα και την πρακτική. Η ετερογένεια και η ποικιλομορφία των μαθησιακών δυσκολιών, η συνεχώς αυξανόμενη συχνότητά τους στον μαθητικό πληθυσμό και η έλλειψη σαφών κριτηρίων αξιολόγησης για τη διάγνωση των παιδιών που επηρεάζονται είναι ζητήματα που απασχολούν κάθε γονέα, δάσκαλο, θεραπευτή και ερευνητή που ασχολούνται με αυτό το πεδίο. Ταυτόχρονα, αυτά τα ζητήματα περιπλέκουν τον ορισμό των μαθησιακών δυσκολιών και προκαλούν σύγχυση γύρω από την εκπαιδευτική, συναισθηματική και κοινωνική ανάπτυξη αυτών των παιδιών (Sevdali, 2013).

Σύμφωνα με τον Sevdali (2013), τα παιδιά με μαθησιακές δυσκολίες μπορεί να εκδηλώσουν ένα ή περισσότερα χαρακτηριστικά από ένα φάσμα συμπτωμάτων, με τα πιο κοινά να είναι δυσκολίες στο γράψιμο, την ανάγνωση, την προφορική έκφραση και τις μαθηματικές δεξιότητες. Επιπλέον, ενδέχεται να αντιμετωπίσουν έλλειψη προσοχής, δυσκολία στην οργάνωση πληροφοριών, αποδιοργάνωση υπό συνθήκες στρες και έντασης, υπερκινητικότητα, δυσκολίες συντονισμού χεριών και δυσκολία στην κατανόηση εννοιών ή λέξεων. Μπορεί επίσης να δυσκολεύονται να βρουν τον προσανατολισμό τους στον χώρο και να αντιληφθούν τις ακολουθίες χρόνου, όπως η σειρά των ημερών, των μηνών και των ωρών.

Ο προσδιορισμός της ακριβούς αιτίας των μαθησιακών δυσκολιών είναι ένα πολύ δύσκολο εγχείρημα, καθώς αυτή εντοπίζεται σε διάφορους παράγοντες, τόσο ενδογενείς όσο και εξωγενείς, που συχνά συνυπάρχουν. Οι ενδογενείς παράγοντες είναι υπεύθυνοι για τη δημιουργία μαθησιακών δυσκολιών και οι πιο συνηθισμένοι περιλαμβάνουν ένα επίκτητο τραύμα, γενετικές / κληρονομικές επιδράσεις και περιβαλλοντικές επιδράσεις, όπως αλλεργικές αντιδράσεις σε τρόφιμα και συντηρητικά τροφίμων (Sevdali, 2013). Οι εξωγενείς παράγοντες δεν είναι κληρονομικοί, αλλά σχετίζονται κυρίως με το περιβάλλον μέσα στο οποίο μεγαλώνει ένα παιδί. Αυτοί περιλαμβάνουν σωματικές αναπηρίες (π.χ. οπτικές και ακουστικές), τραυματικές εμπειρίες, οικογενειακές πιέσεις, ανεπαρκή διδασκαλία και χαμηλή αυτοεκτίμηση. Οι εξωγενείς παράγοντες δεν είναι η πρωταρχική αιτία εμφάνισης των μαθησιακών δυσκολιών, αλλά μπορεί να διαδραματίσουν σημαντικό ρόλο στην επιδείνωσή τους (Sevdali, 2013).

Τα παιδιά με μαθησιακές δυσκολίες πρέπει να λάβουν μια συνεχή και συντονισμένη διεπιστημονική παρέμβαση από διάφορες ειδικότητες σε μια εξελικτική πορεία, δηλαδή από την παιδική ηλικία έως την εφηβεία, εγκαίρως και αποτελεσματικά (Sevdali, 2013). Στην Κύπρο, καθώς και σε πολλές άλλες χώρες, η περίθαλψη και η υποστήριξη παιδιών με μαθησιακές δυσκολίες διασφαλίζονται από τον νόμο. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, τον Σεπτέμβριο του 2001, το Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Πολιτισμού εφάρμοσε έναν νόμο του 1999, ο οποίος ορίζει ότι η απαραίτητη βοήθεια πρέπει να παρέχεται σε παιδιά με ειδικές ανάγκες για τη συνολική ανάπτυξή τους σε όλους τους τομείς. Ως εκ τούτου, το κράτος έχει την υποχρέωση να παρέχει σε αυτά τα παιδιά πλήρη ειδική εκπαίδευση από έναν καθηγητή ειδικής αγωγής μέχρι να ολοκληρώσουν την εκπαίδευσή τους (Νεοφύτου, 2016). Ωστόσο, παρά το ισχύον νομικό πλαίσιο, στην Κύπρο δεν έχει επιτευχθεί η πλήρης ενσωμάτωση των μαθητών με μαθησιακές αναπηρίες στα κανονικά σχολεία. Αυτό αποδεικνύεται τόσο από την ύπαρξη ειδικών σχολείων που προορίζονται αποκλειστικά για τους μαθητές αυτούς, όσο και η λειτουργία ειδικών μονάδων εντός των κανονικών σχολείων όπου και πάλι φοιτούν για ορισμένες διδακτικές περιόδους αυτά τα άτομα.

Η παρούσα μελέτη φέρνει στο επίκεντρο της συζήτησης τους Κύπριους εκπαιδευτικούς τόσο της γενικής όσο και της ειδικής εκπαίδευσης και επιχειρεί να προσεγγίσει το ζήτημα της πλήρους, μερικής ή καθόλου ένταξης των παιδιών με μαθησιακές αναπηρίες στα γενικά, μη ειδικά σχολεία μέσα από τη δική τους οπτική γωνία. Στόχος είναι να δοθεί μια απάντηση σε ένα κρίσιμο ερώτημα: σύμφωνα με τους εκπαιδευτικούς, πρέπει τα παιδιά με μαθησιακές δυσκολίες να φοιτούν σε ένα κανονικό σχολείο, σε ένα ειδικό σχολείο ή σε έναν συνδυασμό των δύο; Στην προσπάθεια να καταλήξουμε σε ένα συμπέρασμα για το τι αποτελεί ιδανικό εκπαιδευτικό περιβάλλον για αυτά τα παιδιά, η μελέτη χρησιμοποιεί δεδομένα από ερωτηματολόγιο που έχει διανεμηθεί σε εκπαιδευτικούς που ασχολούνται με αυτούς τους μαθητές.

Ελπίζω ότι αυτή η εργασία θα συμβάλει στην καλύτερη ενημέρωση γύρω από το πεδίο των μαθησιακών δυσκολιών και θα δώσει απαντήσεις σε ορισμένες σημαντικές ερωτήσεις που απασχολούν τους γονείς, τους δασκάλους και τους θεραπευτές. Τα αποτελέσματα αυτής της έρευνας θα θέσουν τη βάση ενός πιο ωφέλιμου εκπαιδευτικού περιβάλλοντος, το οποίο θα αναδείξει τις δυνατότητες αυτών των παιδιών και θα τους

βοηθήσει να εξασφαλίσουν ένα καλύτερο μέλλον. Αυτό πρέπει να επιτευχθεί μέσω της εφαρμογής διαφοροποιημένης διδασκαλίας και της συνεχιζόμενης αναβάθμισης του εκπαιδευτικού υλικού.

Abstract

Learning disabilities is a complex and multifaceted field in research and practice. The heterogeneity and diversity of learning disabilities, their ever-increasing frequency in student population, and the lack of clear-cut evaluation criteria for the diagnosis of the children affected are issues which preoccupy every parent, teacher, therapist, and researcher involved in the field. At the same time, these issues complicate the definition of learning disabilities and cause confusion around the educational, emotional, and social development of these children (Sevdali, 2013).

According to Sevdali (2013), children with special educational needs (SEN) may manifest one or more characteristics from a spectrum of symptoms, the most common being difficulties in writing, reading, oral expression, and math skills. In addition, they may experience a lack of attention, difficulty in organizing information, disorganization under conditions of stress and tension, hyperkineticity, hand coordination difficulties, and difficulty in understanding concepts or words. They may also find it hard to find their orientation in space and to perceive time sequences, such as the order of days, months, and hours.

Determining the exact cause of Learning Disabilities is a very difficult task, as multiple factors, both endogenous and exogenous, often co-exist. Endogenous factors are primarily responsible for the creation of Learning Disabilities and the most common ones include an acquired trauma, genetic / hereditary effects, and environmental influences, such as allergic reactions to foods and food preservatives (Sevdali, 2013). Exogenous factors are not hereditary, but mostly relate to the environment within which a child grows. These include physical impairments (e.g. visual and auditory), traumatic experiences, family pressures, insufficient teaching, and low self-esteem. Exogenous

factors are not primarily responsible for Learning Disabilities, but they may play a significant role in their deterioration (Sevdali, 2013).

Children with SEN need to receive an ongoing and coordinated interdisciplinary intervention from several specialties in an evolutionary course, namely from infancy to adolescence, in a timely and effective manner (Sevdali, 2013). In Cyprus, as well as in many other countries, the treatment and support of children with SEN is secured by law. More specifically, in September 2001, the Ministry of Education and Culture implemented a law of 1999, which stipulates that the necessary assistance should be provided to children with special needs for their overall development in all sectors. Therefore, the state has the obligation to provide these children with full special education from a special education teacher until they complete their education (Neophytou, 2016). Yet, despite the current legal framework, Cyprus is far from having achieved the full inclusion of children with learning disabilities in mainstream schools. The existence of special schools which are exclusively organized for these students as well as the operation of special units within mainstream schools which are attended by students with SEN for specified teaching hours corroborate this statement.

This study turns the spotlight onto the Cypriot teachers of regulars and special schools and attempts to approach the issue of full, partial, or zero inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools through their own perspective. The aim is to give an answer to a crucial question: according to teachers, should children with learning disabilities attend a mainstream school, a special school, or a combination of both? In attempting to conclude on the ideal educational environment for these children, the study uses data derived from a questionnaire distributed to teachers who deal with such students.

I hope that this work will raise awareness around the field of Learning Disabilities and will provide answers to some important questions which preoccupy parents, teachers, and therapists. The results of this research will lay the basis of a most beneficiary educational environment, which will bring out the best in these children and will help them secure a better future. This should be achieved through the implementation of differentiated teaching and the ongoing upgrading of the educational material.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1. Introduction to learning disabilities

The process of learning is an important part of human life. It starts from the very first days of one's life and it requires specific stimuli and continuous support in order for a human being to be able to respond and acquire all the necessary skills and abilities. These stimuli and support are offered, among others, through teaching, a process which helps the student acquire information and knowledge. However, the success of the process of learning is conditional upon the student's ability to learn.

Special educational needs (SEN) and learning disabilities are related to difficulties in reading, writing, and mathematics, and are associated with children without physical or sensory deficits. These difficulties are best defined as a group of disorders related to comprehension, oral speech production, written speech production, and mathematical skills. They are inherited in the individual and are usually attributed to a dysfunction of the central nervous system. They can occur throughout a person's life.

This study turns the spotlight onto Cyprus educational reality and investigates the view of teachers on the matter of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools. The aim is to give an answer to a crucial question: according to teachers, should children with learning disabilities attend a mainstream school, a special school, or a combination of both? Teachers have a dominant role in the lives of children with learning disabilities because, through their specialization and experience, they can encourage and support them, help them develop, achieve their goals, and mark improvement to secure a better future and a healthy lifestyle. It is for this reason that the present study attempts to approach the issue of full, partial, or zero inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools through the perspective of teachers, as their views are of primary importance.

In attempting to conclude on the ideal educational environment for these children, the study uses data derived from a questionnaire distributed to teachers who deal with such

students. The primary research has been conducted in an elementary school and in a special school, where teachers, kindergarten teachers, speech therapists, special education and other teachers work.

Before proceeding any further, it is important to analyze the characteristics of children with SEN, stressing the fact that there is not a single definition where the profile of these children can fit in. On the contrary, whilst they share some common difficulties, they also have some very distinctive features, which make the diagnosis, treatment, and classification of these children very complicated. As will be shown later, this diverse profile complicates the issue of their educational inclusion too.

1.1 The main characteristics of children with SEN

In recent years, learning disabilities have been a problem for the educational reality, as it affects thousands of students and preoccupies both teachers and parents. A large number of students in both primary and secondary education fail daily, lacking early detection of their learning difficulties or their need for effective educational support. Individuals who fall in the category of students with learning difficulties have diverse and heterogeneous characteristics both in terms of the nature of learning difficulties they face and in terms of their response to the teaching provided (Panteliadou-Botsas, 2007). Learning disabilities constitute the largest category of special educational needs and according to Greek and international literature, 50% of students attending Special Education Schools have been diagnosed with learning disabilities (Botsas, Panteliadou, 2007).

As mentioned above, children with Learning Disabilities form an extremely heterogeneous group, mainly due to the diversity they show in terms of how their individual abilities develop. Therefore, researchers as well as teachers often find it hard to build a homogeneous profile for students with Learning Disabilities. In addition, the existence of so many different characteristics makes the work of teachers even harder (Triga-Mertika, 2010).

The scale and size of the characteristics associated with Learning Disabilities, such as difficulties in the reception and production of oral speech, reading, writing, reasoning and

mathematics, is a predictive factor in the diagnosis of Learning Disabilities (Kalomiris, 2007; Triga-Mertika, 2010). Learning Disabilities are classified into four main categories, which are analysed in more detail below.

1.1.1 Problems in the Reception and Production of Oral Speech

The existence of problems in the reception and production of spoken language has been closely linked to the existence of learning difficulties in written speech and especially in reading both in the first grades and in the secondary education (Livaniou, 2004). In fact, difficulties in the production of oral speech and, in particular, poor vocabulary and problems in writing have been associated with reading difficulties. Lastly, weaknesses in the correct handling of grammar rules have highlighted the important relationship between oral speech and performance in decoding and spelling (Panteliadou, Patsiodimou, 2007; Triga Mertika, 2010).

1.1.2 Problems with Reading and Writing

Many children with learning disabilities have problems with writing and reading (Panteliadou, Patsiodimou, 2007). Students who have difficulty in reading show weaknesses in basic cognitive skills of perception, memory (visual and/or auditory), language and phonological awareness. Therefore, their difficulties are related to the auditory-linguistic and the visual-spatial level (Polychroni, Chatzichristou, Bibou, 2010). These problems focus on all components of reading: decoding, ease of reading, and reading comprehension (Serdaris, 1998). The student confuses letters, numbers, words, sequences, or verbal explanations; spells phonetically and in a contradictory way; reads with limited comprehension and gets tired easily. In addition, the student reads with a slow pace and limited expression, copies and holds notes with difficulty, and needs a long time to successfully read and write (Panteliadou & Patsiodimou, 2007; Floratou, 2009).

The main symptoms of Reading Disorder are the following:

a) slow reading, with hesitation, without flow and with frequent spelling,
b) the omission, addition, replacement of letters, syllables or words;
c) the non-consecutive reading of the lines of the text and
d) the incomplete understanding of the text.

On the other hand, the main symptoms of Written Expression Disorder are:
a) the omission, addition, replacement of letters, syllables or words;
b) the many spelling mistakes even in words that have been systematically taught; and
c) scribble, smudges, absence of punctuation marks, elimination of spaces between words.

1.1.3 Reasoning Problems

Students with learning disabilities often have difficulties in reasoning, namely in executive functional skills, in the use of cognitive learning strategies and in self-regulatory skills. They usually show an impulsive cognitive behaviour (lack of thoughtfulness), that is, they almost automatically answer questions and problems, and most of the time, give wrong answers, since they have not thought at all before answering (Floratou, 2009). Lastly, students with learning difficulties face problems in metacognitive skills, that is, in checking and evaluating the results of their cognitive effort (Botsas & Panteliadou, 2007; Triga-Mertika, 2010).

1.1.4 Problems in Mathematics

A significant percentage (5% to 8%) of students without learning difficulties face particular difficulties in mathematics, while a large number of students with learning difficulties face severe problems in performing arithmetic operations, in the concept of number, in the use of strategies and in the interpretation of graphs (Panteliadou &

Patsiodimou, 2007). Many children with spatial and physical disorders often have severe arithmetic problems. The main symptoms in Math Disorder are:

a) the difficulty in recognizing mathematical symbols;

b) difficulty copying numbers and operations; and

c) the difficulty in learning multiplication and in the use of "prisoners".

To sum up, learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group of disorders, which manifest themselves through significant difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning and math skills. Deficiencies in any area of information processing can occur in all categories of learning difficulties analysed above. Learning Disabilities can be categorised either based on the type of information processing that is affected by the individual's difficulty or based on the specific difficulties caused by a deficiency in processing. Children with learning disabilities often face behavioural problems, such as difficulties in self-control, social perception, and social interaction. Learning disabilities may coexist with other conditions of disability, such as sensory impairment, mental retardation, severe emotional disturbance, or with external influences such as inadequate or inappropriate teaching. However, learning disabilities should not be considered as the direct result of these conditions or effects (Hammill, 1990). It should be noted that the degree to which these learning disabilities manifest themselves may differ significantly among individuals; some people may have a unique, distinct learning problem that only slightly affects their lives, while other people may have multiple severe learning disabilities.

As Stavrou Zoe points out in her article (2013), people with learning difficulties may have deficiencies in their phonology (awareness), in the division of words into consonants, as well as their spatio-temporal orientation, finding it hard to distinguish right from left, or before from after. In addition, the author informs us that children with learning disabilities may find it difficult to form friendships, especially at a young age, or even socialise with adults. In reality, one of the biggest challenges these children face is developing social skills. Some children may not behave properly at school because they prefer to look "bad" rather than show others that they are children with low abilities. In their attempt to learn, these children tend to become more and more frustrated, have emotional problems, and develop feelings of low self-esteem due to repeated failures. As

a result, they often become introvert and prefer to abstain from in-school and out-of-school activities. Within the circle of their close family, they still face difficulties in socialising. More specifically, their relationship with their siblings is often disrupted, as their siblings may experience negative feelings towards them such as jealousy, aggression, and guilt, due to the 'special' attention and care they receive from their parents.

Learning disabilities, especially in their social dimension, are often noticed by the family members, as well as the classmates of these children. It is however noteworthy that in most cases the children themselves realise this 'deviation' from the norm. That is, they understand that they have a difficulty and that, due to this difficulty, they are isolated by their classmates. As a result, from a very young age, the social integration of these children and their ability to cooperate with other people, to form interpersonal relationships, and to take responsibilities as members of a social group are severely affected or even hampered. It is therefore crucial for these children firstly to realise that their learning disabilities cannot be an obstacle in their contact with others, and secondly to receive the necessary intervention and therapy to achieve smooth interpersonal relationships.

Research in the field of Special Education shows that there is an increasing number of young children being diagnosed with learning disabilities. It is important to understand that every child with Learning Disabilities has his/her own unique profile, which may share some common characteristics with the rest of the individuals belonging to this spectrum but at the same time may have several different needs from the others.

1.2 Educational Policy in Cyprus for SEN

Children with SEN need to receive an ongoing and coordinated interdisciplinary intervention from several specialties in an evolutionary course, namely from infancy to adolescence, in a timely and effective manner (Sevdali, 2013). In Cyprus, as well as in many other countries, the treatment and support of children with SEN is secured by law. Since September 2001, the Ministry of Education and Culture has been implementing the

"Law on the Education of Children with Special Needs Law of 1999 (113 (I) / 1999)" and the 2001 Special Needs Regulation Education of Children. Within the framework of this Law, its amendments and the Mechanism for Early Identification of Children with Special Needs Regulation of 2001, the necessary assistance is provided to children with special needs for their overall development in all areas - psychological, social, and educational. This assistance includes all levels of education (pre-primary, primary, secondary general and technical, and higher), as well as pre-vocational and vocational training in schools, where possible.

The state essentially has the obligation to provide education and training to people with special needs from the age of three until the completion of their studies (Neophytou, 2016). However, despite the current legal framework, it is worth noting that the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools without exception is nowhere explicitly and clearly stated. Therefore, Cyprus is far from having achieved the full inclusion of children with learning disabilities in mainstream schools; the existence of special schools which are exclusively organized for these students as well as the operation of special units within mainstream schools which are attended by students with SEN for specified teaching hours corroborate this statement. In fact, the setting in which the education of children with SEN takes place depends on the case. For example, some children are offered special education in a mainstream public school within a regular class where the aim is full integration with support. Other children are taught in a special unit within a model of partial integration. And other children attend schools of special education and training or other places where such special services are provided (Neophytou, 2016).

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Research

This research delves into the current educational reality in Cyprus and seeks to investigate teachers' perceptions around the topic of inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools. The aim here is to bring forth the ideal learning environment for these students as interpreted through the lenses of their teachers, providing answer to the crucial question 'is it better for these children to attend a mainstream school, a special

school or both at the same time'? The originality of this study stems not only from its geographical focus on one particular – and understudied – country, Cyprus, but also and most importantly from the fact that it sheds light on the perspective of those who play an important role in the lives of these children – their teachers and therapists. In fact, the primary research will be carried out through a quality questionnaire distributed to teachers working in a primary school as well as teachers working at a special needs school in Cyprus.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Literature Review

The topic of inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools has repetitively become a cause for debate between psychologists, education specialists, sociologists and other experts. Even though the right of these students to education has never been denied, literature is abundant with fierce discussions around the way whereby this education should be offered. The subject of inclusion – its extent, feasibility and desirability – continues to divide scholars in three main categories. On the one hand, there are those who are staunch defendants of an inclusion without exception, irrespective of any child-, school- or teacher-related factor, asserting that only through an all-inclusive school that simulates the real-life society can they socialize with their typically developing peers and learn to co-exist with them. On the antipodes of this view lies another school of thought according to which inclusion is neither feasible not desirable, as children with learning disabilities can cope better with the demands of an educational program which is exclusively tailored to their needs and is offered in a separate school for students with special needs. In between the two poles, there are those who argue that inclusion is both feasible and desirable but to a certain extent and that special classes should also exist in conjunction with mainstream classes.

It was back in the '60s and '70s when a call for compulsory education emerged in the developed countries of the world. As a result, the attendance of a school was enforced by law and this was applied to children with disabilities too. The first federal law which referred specifically to children with disabilities was the 'Education for Handicapped Children Act' (EHA) enacted in the United States in 1975. This law increased the number of children with disabilities who were offered educational opportunities, even so in separate 'special' classes and contributed to the promotion of the fundamental – and primitive – interpretation of 'inclusion' as the obligation of society to give to children with learning disabilities an organized form of education.

In 1990, the 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act' (IDEA) emerged, which attempted to consolidate the right of all children to an education in a "least restrictive environment" (Booth et al, 2000) and incited many countries to pass laws and adopt policies aiming at inclusion. One can assert that IDEA contributed to the transition into a more elaborated interpretation of 'inclusion', which was now perceived as equivalent to 'integration' and as being the co-existence of disabled and non-disabled students in the same school receiving education by the same teaching personnel.

A crucial moment in the history of education for disabled children towards a third, more advanced interpretation of 'inclusion' was the UNESCO's "Salamanca statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education" in 1994 (UNESCO, 2004) and the "World Declaration on Education for All", which replaced the concept of integration with the notion of 'inclusion' and raised the need for children with learning disabilities to join regular schools alongside with non-disabled children, actively participate in the same lessons, and be offered an education responsive to their special needs. Therefore, education was now considered to be inclusive if it aimed at embracing the particularities of all students and endeavoured to address their needs (Ebersold, 2015). Another milestone was the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006, where inclusion gained legal substance and the purpose of inclusive education became part of the human rights discourse (de Beco, 2018).

Despite the above social, political and legal movements, education for children with disabilities remains an overlooked aspect (Mittler, 2005; Savolainen et al, 2006; Miles & Singal, 2008). In the legal language used to describe the schooling model, inclusion did not have the radical meaning it should have, as its implementation was often phrased with caveats. For instance, Burne (2013) points to the discreet language used in the Salamanca Statement and which made the notion of inclusion quite loose and elastic, when it provided that all children should learn together "wherever possible" or "unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise". Another example is the CRPD which remains silent on the legality of segregating some disabled children in special schools on the grounds that these are unmanageable in mainstream classrooms. This again left room for a loose implementation of the notion of inclusion. Cyprus law is not an exception to that. As pointed out in section 1.2 of this study, the state is obliged by law to offer education

and training to people with SEN throughout their academic life, but the form and setting of this education is not specified, allowing for the existence of special schools and special units within regular schools.

Therefore, despite the emergence of an international urge for inclusion of children with learning disabilities into mainstream schools and despite the fact that the CRPD was ratified by multiple countries, in practice these children remain at large excluded from regular classrooms and are far from receiving the sort of personalized teaching and support that they need (Smytha et al, 2014). It is not a coincidence that scholars often assert that the inclusion of disabled children to mainstream schools was achieved only in paper, without any respective change in policy-making (Genova et al., 2015; De Beco, 2018). In fact, in many Western European countries, special schools have been exclusively designed for the disabled children, resulting in their isolation from mainstream classrooms and undermining the concept of inclusive education. Sweden is one of them. There, although the majority of students with learning disabilities attend mainstream schools, there is also a portion of them attending 'special remedial classes'. These classes are supposedly addressed to students with severe disabilities which impede them from following the mainstream learning objectives, but the aim is for these classes to implement the same curriculum as the mainstream classes (Michailakis & Reich 2009).

The implementation of inclusion 'with exceptions' or 'to a certain extent' has been vigorously criticized by the defendants of inclusion. The 'special schools' have been considered as schools of low quality, where the timetable and principles on which the assessments are made differ from those of mainstream schools. These special schools have also been accused of depriving disabled students from integrating smoothly into society (Connor & Ferri, 2007; de Beco, 2018). At the same time, the mixed system of attending a regular classroom while taking some special classes in a separate unit within the mainstream school has equally been criticized. This has been treated as another form of discrimination against students with SEN, who still experience isolation from their typically developing peers. Also, this mixed system has been accused for removing a significant portion of the responsibility for the progress of these children from the regular teacher and moving it onto the special teacher who undertakes the operation of these special units (de Beco, 2018).

The critics of this 'selective' inclusion defend the imperative need for an inclusive education without exception. As Mazurik-Charles & Stefanou (2010) point out, in mainstream educational settings, children with learning disabilities are offered the chance to develop their social and communication skills and mark progress simply by mimicking their non-disabled peers. The benefits of inclusive education are said to be two-way, as regular students have also a lot to earn through their daily interaction with students with learning disabilities. This is because, in a diverse classroom, children develop awareness of their non-typical peers, feel empathy, learn how to cope and co-exist with people that are somehow different, and value their uniqueness and strengths. In this way, they get prepared for the diversity that real society has (Wagner, 1999; Slee, 2011; Mag et al., 2017).

At the same time, the contribution of all-inclusive classrooms to the extinguishment of social discriminations is highlighted; through the daily interaction with children with SEN, typically developing children are accustomed to the existence of such 'deviations' and accept this as a routine fact of life. This results in playing down the importance of these 'deviations' in the image of a person, as the concept of 'norm' is revisited and anything differentiating disabled children from typically developing children is no longer considered to be a 'deviation' from the norm but rather an integral part of the norm (Kirschner, 2015).

Even though the aforementioned benefits cannot be refuted, full inclusion still remains unattained. It appears that what complicates its implementation are mainly two things, the first relating to attitudes and the second relating to the nature of disabilities per se. Starting from attitudes, it has been noted that prevailing stereotypes and social norms tend to undermine the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools and cultivate their exclusion and discrimination (Miles & Singal, 2008). For instance, there are countries where the Ministry responsible for these children is not that of Education but rather that of Health or Social Welfare (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). These stereotypes are often driven by scientistic explanations given to disability. Autism is a blatant example. The 'deficit' interpretation of the autistic syndrome and the famous 'theory of mind' described these children as incapable of reading the mind of their peers and hence incapable of receiving

any sort of education (Baron-Cohen et al. 1990; Hardman et al, 2008). This medical interpretation of disability was strongly criticised in the beginning of the 21st century (Robertson 2010; Prizant and Field-Meyers 2015; Dinishak 2016) and was revised to a social approach, according to which any type of disability was the result of the inability of society to accommodate the specific needs of the individual. Even so, 'deficit'-driven theories still impose a great influence on parents, teachers, and politicians. In fact, the education of children with SEN is still often held in separate classrooms with a different, special curriculum which is supposed to be tailored to their special needs and is much 'lighter' than the mainstream programme.

The second factor that challenges full inclusion is the nature of disabilities that these children have. As explained before, children with learning disabilities and special educational needs manifest a very diverse and wide spectrum of disorders and are far from being a homogeneous population. The diversity of this population has been used by some critics as an argument against the feasibility or even desirability of an inclusive education. In fact, learning disabilities are expressed in so many different forms that makes each case unique and questions the extent to which education can become individualized and tailored to each student's needs. To become so, schools need to be upgraded with special infrastructure and equipment, as well as with specially educated personnel who will be able to teach all students – with or without learning disabilities.

An example which has been used many times in literature to illustrate the complications of an inclusive education is that of the autistic children. As various critics have asserted, a mainstream school setting may never be fully adapted to the needs of autistic children, as it is inherently disruptive and busy in a way that it could never become the strictly predictable, quiet and routine-based environment that one could describe as 'autistic-friendly' ((Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Ravet, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2014). This would generate the need for the teachers to isolate autistic children in less overwhelming surroundings, which would result in another form of exclusion. Similarly, the content of the curriculum is hard to be adjusted completely to address the needs of children with learning disabilities without it being at the expense of high-quality standards and demands. Any discount to this content for the sake of accommodating the difficulties faced by some students runs the risk of undermining the level of education

offered in mainstream schools (Shakespeare, 2014; Norwich, 2014). As de Beco (2018) argues:

> "not only are there limits to the steps that can be taken to implement the right to inclusive education, but also (…) a 'universal design' can be very difficult to apply in any area of education. (…) Education systems may never be completely adaptable to the needs of all disabled children. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that any 'inclusive education system' will ever reach perfection."

Even the social approach to disability, which stipulates that challenges faced by the disabled children in mainstream schools do not depend on the nature and extent of their disabilities but on how education and society approach these disabilities (Emanuelsson, 2004; De Beco 2018), is undermined by the diversity of children with SEN. Interpreting problems through the lenses of the wider cultural and social context creates doubts as to whether the effect of this external environment makes an all-inclusive education beneficial to children with SEN. Porter & Rishler (1991), for instance, asserted that the benefits that each student can derive from an all-inclusive education are highly dependent on the quality and experience of the teacher, the resources available and other parameters within the narrow environment of the school class. Just as society cannot and will never be organized in a way that takes into account the characteristics of all its members, so is school, which is after all a miniature of society (Barclay, 2012: Shakespeare, 2013). Following the same rationale, some scholars negate the desirability of an inclusive education claiming that it will never be achievable, the main reason being the fact that disability is such a wide notion with so many diverse manifestations that schools will never be prepared to address all individual needs and take all necessary measures to adjust to all students (Anastasiou and Kauffman, 2012; Norwich, 2014).

Therefore, in the absence of an ideal educational environment, some scholars still believe that children with learning disabilities can only benefit from attending special and self-contained classes, where they will have the full attention of a specialized teacher and they will be offered the required time to understand and digest the lesson (Evans & Lunt, 2002; Coots & Stout, 2007; Hardman et al., 2008; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2014; Yu, 2016). Besides, according to Kochhar-Bryant & Green (2009), in these special classrooms,

children with learning disabilities such as autism have the opportunity to learn transition related skills and receive an education more accustomed to developing their social skills in preparation for their integration into society.

In between the two poles – namely special schools vs. inclusion in mainstream schools – a third line of thought emerged which advocates the idea of partial inclusion. This idea has been developed in detail by Mastropieri & Scruggs (2010) who argue that, through partial inclusion, children with learning disabilities reap the benefits of both educational concepts. On the one hand, they have the opportunity to receive intensive teaching by specially trained educators focusing exclusively on their special needs and, on the other hand, they have the chance to interact with their regular peers and socialise with them. More specifically, in a model of partial inclusion, students with SEN attend mainstream classrooms, but leave to attend special and more personalised classes on areas where they find it hard to follow the mainstream teaching. These special classes take place within the mainstream school but are delivered by special teachers. This is more or less the prevailing educational system in Cyprus.

The three approaches to inclusion discussed above have one thing in common – they all acknowledge the central role of the teacher in an inclusive education for children with SEN. The defendants of an inclusion without exception stress this as a key to its successful implementation, whereas the opponents use it as an argument against the feasibility of an all-inclusive education model. Be that as it may, a crucial challenge in forming classrooms with students of diverse capabilities is to have teachers who can undertake multi-faceted responsibilities and be pedagogically prepared to adopt a personalized approach which can address the needs of each and every child. It is not a coincidence that Article 24(4) of the CRPD refers specifically to teachers and requires them to be trained in the use of various educational techniques in order to be in a position to support disabled children.

As teachers is the cornerstone to the full realization of educational inclusion, many studies have focused on the attitudes of mainstream teachers towards inclusion and attempted to approach the subject through their perspective. In most cases, what is surprisingly common irrespective of country and educational system is the teachers' profound reluctance to teach in inclusive classrooms (Dover, 2005; Johnson & Joshi,

2017). This reluctance is not completely unjustified. Teachers often receive minimal training in relation to learning disabilities and are even ignorant about the education rights of such students, which means that they are not sufficiently prepared from university and practical pre-work experience to undertake the teaching of mixed classes. This is evident in a research conducted in Northern Island, according to which practitioners feel that their university education and experience is not adequate to prepare them for the challenging role in an inclusive setting (Winter, 2006; Abbott, 2007). Also, a study in Ireland has proved that, even though teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream classrooms, they tend to set conditions to that, as they believe that a segregation might be permissible depending on the severity of one's disability or its impact on its peers (Kinsella, 2009). This is in line with other findings in countries like UK and Italy, which suggest that teachers are not only unprepared to embrace disability in its full and most severe manifestations, but they also fail to acknowledge inclusion without exception as an incontrovertible right of all children (Avramidis et al., 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Zambelli & Bonni, 2004; Lambe & Bones, 2006).

Of course, as Acedo et al. (2009) acutely note in their speech, being able to teach in an inclusive classroom goes beyond training and university education; it is about teacher's attitude and mentality, much of which is a matter of inner talent. The same researchers use the Finnish educational system as an example to show that the existence of successful teachers is the cornerstone of a successful educational inclusion. In fact, in Finland, teachers are highly respected among society, are very well paid, and receive substantial training. As a result, they have the motivation to put immense efforts in addressing the needs of their students and personalize their teaching to the level of their audience. At the same time, Finnish success is also due to the integration of special teachers in mainstream classrooms, who are equipped with the knowledge and experience to help disabled students integrate and find their position among their non-disabled peers.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

The current study investigates teachers' beliefs about the integration of children with special needs (SEN) in both primary and special needs school in Cyprus. In particular, we attempt to identify the problems that children with SEN may face in both schools and how these problems can be tackled, and also pinpoint the different perceptions held by mainstream schoolteachers (i.e. teachers working in mainstream primary schools) and special schoolteachers (i.e. teachers working in special schools). Through this investigation, we aim to provide an answer to an overarching question: do Cypriot teachers believe that children with SEN should attend a mainstream school, a special school, or a combination of the two? Put simply, what is the position of Cypriot teachers in the current debate in literature and how close are their perceptions and attitudes to those of teachers from other countries?

The analysis is built upon three main axes, each of which constitutes a separate research sub-question:

Research questions

a. How does the educational system in Cyprus promote the integration of children with special needs (SEN) in primary school, according to mainstream teachers' opinions?

b. How does the educational system in Cyprus promote the integration of children with special needs, according to special schoolteachers' opinions?

c. Are there any differences between mainstream schoolteachers' and special schoolteachers' beliefs about promoting the integration of children with SEN in Cyprus? This third sub-question is in turn broken down into the following three questions based on which we will analyse the data on the SPSS:

- Is the profession (i.e. mainstream vs. special schoolteacher) of the participants related to their opinion of the main reason that children with SEN are excluded from a mainstream school?
- Is the profession of the participants related to what they think the attitude of the society is towards children with SEN?
- Are teachers' opinion about the most appropriate solutions to integrate children with SEN associated with their profession?

Methodology

A questionnaire was distributed to 50 schoolteachers working in a mainstream primary school and 50 schoolteachers working in a school for children with special needs. The questionnaire consists of 17 close-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions, which allow the participants give a free-form answer in a few lines. The questionnaire, which examines the integration of children with special needs (SEN) in schools, has been prepared in the framework of the Erasmus program and is available online (see Appendix A).

Sampling

Our sample consisted of 50 mainstream schoolteachers and 50 special schoolteachers. 94 of them were female teachers and 6 were male. The imbalance in terms of gender is a worth-mentioning limitation which should be considered for future research.

All participants were working as teachers in schools of Pafos district during the school year 2020-2021. It was not possible to cover the remaining cities of Cyprus, mainly due to the second wave of Covid-19 in November 2020, which imposed some unexpected limitations to the way the study was conducted. Not only was it difficult to travel to other cities, but also we were faced with the refusal of many teachers to participate and, as a result, it was not possible for us to select the sample randomly and from all over the island. Thus, we cannot generalise the statistical results to the entire population of Cyprus.

Procedure

The distribution and completion of the questionnaire was a simple procedure. Initially, all participants were informed about their participation in the research, as well as the aim of the project. Then, they were given the instructions as to how the questionnaire should be completed. Instructions were read out loud. Each participant should complete the questionnaire on his/her own without any time limitation. It was communicated to all participants that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Teachers had the right

to withdraw at any time they felt uncomfortable (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992).

The research was completed in a timeline of one month, in November 2020.

Data analysis and processing

After we completed the procedure, data was collected and analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics. We initially coded each question and answer and afterwards all data from each questionnaire was inserted in the program. We had to choose the proper statistical analysis in order to answer our research questions.

For the first and the second research questions we chose descriptive statistics because we wanted to quote the answers of each group of teachers, mainstream and special schoolteachers. Our purpose here was to investigate their beliefs and opinions on how each type of school treats children with Special Needs and what they assume to be the best environment for the integration of these children in each case.

For the third research question we chose chi square data analysis because we had to compare the results of two categorical variables, the profession (mainstream vs. special schoolteacher) and their opinion on the main reason children with SEN are excluded, the attitude of the society, and the most appropriate solutions. Their opinion was parted in categories due to the close-ended questions of the questionnaire. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

CHAPTER 4: Results

Descriptive statistics

As mentioned above, the participants in the current study were 50 teachers from a mainstream primary school and 50 teachers from a special school. We managed to have an equal number of participants from both groups, which helped us draw better comparisons and come to stronger conclusions.

Table 4.1: The two groups of Teachers

Profession	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Special Education Teachers	50	50
Mainstream schoolteachers	50	50
Total	100	100

In addition, we recorded the number of teachers that deal with children with SEN every day in their classes. As expected, almost all Special Education Teachers (98%) have children with disabilities and difficulties in their classes, whereas less than half of mainstream schoolteachers deal with these students (44%).

Table 4.2: The existence or not of children with SEN in their classes, according to their profession.

Are there children with SEN in your classes?	Primary Schoolteachers	Percentage (%)	Special Education Teachers	Percentage (%)
Yes	22	44	49	98
No	28	56	1	2
Total	50	100	50	100

When we asked teachers to state the precise difficulties faced by their students with SEN, we recorded the following results:

Table 4.3: Type of disabilities that teachers have in their classrooms

Type of special needs	Primary School Teacher	Special Education Teacher
Sensitive Impairments	2	7
Physics / Motor impairments	1	3
Mental / Intellectual deficiencies	6	12
Socio-affective impairments (behavioral deficiencies)	3	9
Learning deficiencies	10	15
Language deficiencies	0	4

Total	22	50

According to both groups of teachers, the most common disability recorded in children with SEN is learning deficiencies.

Results for Research Question 1: How does the educational system in Cyprus promote the integration of children with special needs (SEN) in primary school, according to teachers' opinions?

Even though mainstream schoolteachers do not commonly deal with children with SEN in their classes (at the present study only 44% of them have SEN children in their classes), they still have strong beliefs on how the educational system has to promote their integration in primary school. In the following chapter, we will present the demographic characteristics of this group of participants and then go through their preferences about school classes for children with SEN. We will also see how they interpret the fact that these children are excluded from a mainstream school and what solutions they suggest.

The following table illustrates the age group to which each participant belongs. It is obvious that almost every age group is well represented in the present study, except for the group of 51 to 60 years old. It was not possible for us to include participants in this age group due to the pandemic of Covid-19 and government's limitations.

Table 4.4: Age groups and percentage for Primary Schoolteachers

Age	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
21-25	21	42
26-30	3	6
31-40	13	26
41-50	13	26
51-60	0	0
Total	50	100

The Table below shows the number of participants according to their gender. As already pointed out, male teachers were not sufficiently represented in the present study, which might affect the generalization of the results to the entire population.

Table 4.5: Gender and Percentage for Primary School Teachers

Gender	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Male	3	6
Female	47	94
Total	50	100

It is interesting to see the answers given by teachers working in mainstream primary school when asked where they would send their own child with SEN, if they had one. The most common answer is that they would choose special class in a mainstream school. The table below shows the results and percentage for each answer that was given.

Table 4.6: Where mainstream schoolteachers choose to send their child with SEN

If you had a child with SEN you would like him/her to go to:	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Special school	1	2
Mainstream School	7	14
Special Class in mainstream school	42	84
Total	50	100

This is in line with the answers given to the question of whether children with SEN succeed better in a mainstream school than in a special school. The results indicate that the vast majority of mainstream schoolteachers (76%) believe that the level of success is just medium in mainstream schools compared to special schools, which explains why they would not choose a mainstream school for their own SEN child, unless they could have a special class in it.

Table 4.7: Level of success of a child with SEN in mainstream vs. in special school according to Primary Schoolteachers' opinion

The level of success of a child with SEN in a mainstream school vs. a child in special school	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Very High	2	4
High	9	8
Medium	38	76
Weak	1	2

Very Weak	0	0
Total	50	100

In addition, we tried to investigate mainstream schoolteachers' opinion about the most important factor of integration of children with SEN in a mainstream school. The results are reported below.

Table 4.8: Most important factor of integration in mainstream school according to Primary Schoolteachers

The most important factor of integration of child with SEN in mainstream school	**Number of participants**	**Percentage (%)**
Adapting the curriculum till personalization	6	12.2
Differentiated activities and assessments	1	2.0
Socio – affective relationship between children and teacher	25	51.0
Specialist group in school	17	34.7
Total	49	100.0

The participants do not believe that attending a mainstream school results in a better academic performance for students with SEN. Therefore, when asked to identify the most important factor of integration, they implicitly pointed to the inability of teachers to

develop socio–affective relationship with their SEN children and the insufficiency of the educational system due to lack of specialists in this type of disabilities.

However, it is observed that parents of children with SEN tend to choose mainstream schools instead of special schools for their children to attend. The present study tried to identify what mainstream schoolteachers think about this choice.

Table 4.9: Mainstream Schoolteachers' opinion about the reasons of which family of a child with SEN prefers mainstream school instead of a special school

Reasons for which family of a child with SEN chooses a mainstream school instead of a special school	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage (%)**
The integration in society possibility	17	34
Establishing adequate interpersonal relationships	13	26
Assimilation of daily lifestyle	10	20
The right at equal chances	10	20
Total	50	100

As illustrated in the table above, mainstream schoolteachers believe that parents often choose a mainstream school for the possibility it offers to their child for social integration and, at a secondary level, for adequate interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, participants were asked to state the reasons they believe that the educational system seems to be insufficient to accommodate and handle students with SEN in mainstream schools.

Table 4.10: Mainstream schoolteachers' opinion about the main reason for which a child with SEN is excluded from a mainstream school. The following table shows the results.

What is, in your opinion, the main reason for which a child with SEN is marginalized or excluded from a mainstream school?	**Number of participants**	**Percentage (%)**
His incapacity to cope with school requirements	18	36
Different forms and levels of school failure	5	10
Reduced understanding of these children's needs	19	38
Teachers' lack of experience	8	16
Total	50	100

The largest number of teachers working in the mainstream school (38%) stated that reduced understanding of these children's needs is the main reason for which students with SEN face marginalisation in a mainstream school. The incapacity of these children to cope with school requirements is an almost equally important reason (36%).

In conclusion, the current research indicates that mainstream schoolteachers do not believe that the educational system promotes the integration of children with special needs. In contrast, they declare that children's performance in mainstream schools is

medium compared to special schools, and if they had a child with SEN, they would prefer special classes in mainstream schools, just because they believe that this would help children to integrate better in society. In addition, they attribute the marginalisation of children with SEN to a reduced understanding of their needs as well as their own inability to cope with the school requirements. Moreover, according to their view, the socio-affective relationship between student and teacher needs to be improved in order to achieve better integration of children with SEN in school society.

Results for Research Question 2: How does the educational system in Cyprus promote the integration of children with special needs (SEN), according to special schoolteachers' opinions?

Teachers working in special schools deal every day with children with different kinds of special needs. The research tried to investigate the robustness of the educational system in Cyprus in promoting the integration of these children in special needs schools. This chapter initially presents the demographical characteristics of the fifty special schoolteachers who participated in the study and then present their answers to the questionnaire.

As shown below, special schoolteachers who participated in the study represented well all age groups.

Table 4.11: Age groups and percentage for Special Schoolteachers

Age	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
21-25	13	26
26-30	4	8
31-40	23	46
41-50	8	16

51-60	2	4
Total	50	100

As in the case of mainstream schoolteachers, the gender of the participants for Special Needs school was not equally represented. There were only 3 men as opposed to 47 women. Therefore, it is obvious that the sampling of the research has a limitation which prevents results from being generalised to the population of Cyprus.

Table 4.12: Gender and Percentage for Special Schoolteachers

Gender	**Number of participants**	**Percentage (%)**
Male	3	6
Female	47	94
Total	50	100

Just like the mainstream schoolteachers, the vast majority of special schoolteachers would choose special classes in mainstream schools for their SEN children to attend to. Special schools alone do not seem to be an option for either group.

Table 4.13: Where special schoolteachers choose to send their child with SEN

If you had a child with SEN you would like to go to:	**Number of participants**	**Percentage (%)**
Special school	1	2
Mainstream School	7	14

Special Class in mainstream school	42	84
Total	50	100

Moreover, most special schoolteachers agree that the level of success of a child with SEN in a mainstream school as opposed to a child in a special school is medium. On the other hand, there is also a significant number of teachers (32%) who believe that children with SEN have a high performance in a mainstream school. The results are shown on the table below.

Table 4.14: Level of success of a child with SEN in mainstream vs. in special school according to special schoolteachers' opinion

The level of success of a child with SEN in a mainstream school vs. a child in special school	**Number of participants**	**Percentage (%)**
Very high	6	12
High	16	32
Medium	25	50
Weak	2	4
Very weak	1	2
Total	50	100

Furthermore, improvements need to be made so that special need schools would not be the last choice of parents of a child with SEN. According to special schoolteachers, the choice of a mainstream school instead of a special school offers the possibility of better integration in the society and equal rights.

Table 4.15: Special schoolteachers' opinion about the reasons of which family of a child with SEN prefers mainstream school instead of a special school

Reasons for which family of a child with SEN chooses a mainstream school instead of a special school	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
The integration in society possibility	20	40
Establishing adequate interpersonal relationships	8	16
Assimilation of daily lifestyle	6	12
The right at equal chances	16	32
Total	50	100

The experience of special schoolteachers with children with SEN differentiates their beliefs about the reasons that these children are marginalised or excluded from a mainstream school. In contrast with mainstream schoolteachers, special schoolteachers reveal that the educational system does not understand children's needs, and therefore students are incapable of coping with school requirements, which leads to their exclusion from mainstream school society.

Table 4.16: Special schoolteachers' opinion about the main reason for which a child with SEN is excluded from a mainstream school

What is, in your opinion, the main reason for which a child with SEN	Number of participants	Percentage (%)

is marginalized or excluded from a mainstream school?		
His incapacity to cope with school requirements	15	30
Different forms and levels of school failure	7	14
Reduced understanding of these children's needs	18	36
Teachers' lack of experience	10	20
Total	50	100

In conclusion, this research reveals that special schoolteachers would also prefer special classes in mainstream schools, and, similarly to mainstream schoolteachers, they consider children's with SEN performance as medium within a mainstream school compared to a special school. This reveals the improvements that need to be made in mainstream schools and the deficiencies of special schools for students with SEN. Additionally, special schoolteachers indicate that parents expect equal rights and integration to society for their children with SEN, which is the reason why they choose mainstream schools instead of special schools. Finally, the current study remarkably brings out some key reasons for the marginalisation of these children – the inability of the mainstream school to understand these children's needs and the inability of children with SEN to cope with the requirements of a mainstream school.

Results for Research question 3: Are there any differences between special schoolteachers' and mainstream schoolteachers' beliefs about promoting the integration of children with special needs in Cyprus?

In order to investigate the differences, if any, between the views held by special school and mainstream schoolteachers about the integration of children with SEN, we divided the third research question into individual research questions and used chi-square statistical analysis. Initially, we examined if there are differences between the two groups of teachers in their opinion about the reason of children's marginalisation. Secondly, we investigated the association between their profession and their opinion about society's attitude towards these children. Finally, we recorded and compared the solution they suggest for achieving a better integration.

Is the profession (mainstream vs. special schoolteacher) of the participants related to their opinion of the main reason that children with SEN are excluded from a mainstream school?

To examine this question, we conducted a chi-square test of Independence. This test determines whether our two categorical variables are associated or independent (Frank et al, 2012).

Table 4.17: Chi-square test results for the relation between teachers' groups and their opinion of children's marginalisation

Chi-Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.208[a]	3	.530
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.50.

There is no significant difference between the two groups (primary school and special education teacher) and their beliefs about the main reason children with SEN are excluded from a mainstream school, $\chi^2(3,100) = 2.208, p = 0.530$. Both professions seem to strongly believe that the main reason children are marginalised from a mainstream school is the reduced understanding of their needs, as mentioned above.

Is the profession of the participants related to how participants perceive the attitude of the society towards children with SEN?

The table below shows the results of teachers' opinion about the attitude of the society towards children with SEN, for both groups separately. From a first view there seem to be significant divergence in teachers' answers; therefore, we conducted a chi-square test of Independence to sort this out more clearly.

Table 4.18: Crosstabulation between profession and opinion about the attitude of the society towards children with SEN

			What is your profession?	
			Primary School Teacher	Special Education Teacher
What do you think the attitude of the society is towards children with SEN?	Isolation	Participants	5	6
		%	10.0	12.0
	Ignorance	Participants	17	12
		%	34.0	24.0
	Rejection	Participants	15	4

		%	30.0	8.0
	Tolerance	Participants	8	13
		%	16.0	26.0
	Acceptance	Participants	3	13
		%	6.0	26.0
	Support	Participants	2	2
		%	4.0	4.0
Total		Participants	50	50
		%	100.0	100.0

Table 4.19: Chi-square test results for the relation between the profession and the opinion about society's attitude towards children with SEN

Chi-Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.762[a]	5	.011
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 2 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.00.

There seems to be a significant difference between the two groups of teachers (primary schoolteachers and special education teachers) about their views on the attitude of the

society towards children with SEN, $\chi^2(5, 100) = 14.762, p < 0.05$. This leads us to the conclusion that the profession of the teachers is closely associated to their beliefs about society's attitude towards these children.

What it seems to be remarkable is that teachers in primary schools seem to believe that the society acts with ignorance and rejection towards children with SEN. In contrast, special education teachers state that they notice acceptance and tolerance from the society towards these children.

We also examined the views of the participants about their own attitude towards children with difficulties. Both groups seem to agree that they support and accept these students in their classes. Despite their statements, we understand that self-criticism is hard to attain.

Table 4.20: Crosstabulation between profession and their attitude towards children with SEN

			What is your profession?	
			Primary schoolteacher	Special education Teacher
What is your attitude towards children with SEN	Acceptance	Participants	29	23
		%	58.0%	56.0%
	Support	Count	21	25
		%	42.0%	50.0%
	Tolerance	Count	0	1
		%	0.0%	2.0%

	Indifference	Count	0	1
		%	0.0%	2.0%
Total		Count	50	50
		%	100.0%	100.0 %

As expected, chi square test of independence revealed no significant differences between normal school and special schoolteachers, $\chi^2(3,100) = 3.040$, p=0.385.

Are teachers' opinion about the most appropriate solutions to integrate children with SEN associated with their profession?

An additional issue which is worthy of some further examination is the relationship between teachers' profession and their opinion of the suitable solution to avoid children's marginalisation. The first table below presents the frequency of the possible answers for each group of teachers. The second table presents the chi-square results of the crosstabulation.

Table 4.21 Crosstabulation between teachers' profession and their opinion about the most appropriate solution to achieve children's integration

			What is your profession?	
			Primary school teacher	Special Education Teacher
What are, in your opinion, the most appropriate	Special schools	Participants	4	15
		%	8.0	30.0

solutions to integrate students with SEN?	Integration in mainstream schools	Participants	2	7
		%	4.0	14.0
	Special classes in mainstream schools	Participants	10	18
		%	20.0	36.0
	Special schools or mainstream schools, upon the case.	Participants	34	10
		%	68.0	20.0
Total		Participants	50	50
		%	100.0	100.0

Table 4.22: Chi-square test results for the association between teachers' profession and the proper solutions each group suggests

Chi-Square Test

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.523[a]	3	.000***
N of Valid Cases	100		

a. 2 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.50.

Teachers' opinion about the most appropriate solutions to integrate children with SEN is strongly associated to their profession (Mainstream school or special school), and the result is statistically significant, $\chi^2(3,100) = 24.523, df = 3, p < 0.05$.

Most teachers in special education declare that children with special needs have to be integrated in mainstream schools but in special classes, in contrast with primary schoolteachers who seem to strongly believe that the type of schools they should attend depends on the case.

In conclusion, both mainstream schoolteachers and special needs teachers agree that the reduced understanding of children's needs leads to children's marginalisation. What they seem to disagree in is the attitude of the society towards these children. The first group maintains that society rejects children with SEN, whereas the second group of participants sees acceptance and tolerance towards these children. Last but not least, the ideal educational environment, as perceived by the participants in this study, is not monolithic. Neither the mainstream schoolteachers nor the special schoolteachers rule out the one or the other type of schools. On the contrary, the former assert that the ideal educational setting depends on each individual case, whereas the latter claim that a mainstream school with special classes would be the ideal place for the appropriate integration of children with SEN. Again, this answer is tightly linked to the profession of the participants.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

The present research study attempted to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in promoting the inclusion of children with special education needs and learning disabilities in mainstream classes. For this reason, we used data from questionnaires which were distributed to 100 schoolteachers, half of them working in mainstream primary schools and half of them in special schools. The ultimate aim of this investigation was to identify the ideal and most beneficial educational environment which promotes the development, social integration, and overall progress of these children, always through the perspective of Cypriot teachers.

The principal outcome of this investigation is that both types of teachers – mainstream and special school – believe that children with SEN have the right and the ability to attend mainstream schools, but this cannot be achieved without any special support and is also contingent upon the case of each individual. According to the majority of the teachers in special schools, children with SEN should ideally attend special classes within a mainstream school because such an arrangement yields the highest possibilities for a better integration in society. This finding is partly in line with previous studies, which show that regular school placement of children with SEN leads to better academic development and more opportunities for socialisation with other children (de Graaf et al., 2012; de Graaf, 2014; Poulisse, 2002). At the same time, the findings of this study disagree with the abovementioned literature in terms of the level of academic results achieved in mainstream schools, as the majority of the participants maintain that the performance of children with SEN in mainstream schools is medium (rather than good) compared to special needs schools.

Another important portion of the participants, especially teachers of mainstream schools, believe that the choice of school depends on each individual case, as the degree, range, and severity of disabilities can differ largely among children with SEN. This view can be associated with the reservations expressed by previous literature around the appropriateness of inclusive education for children with special difficulties (Hornby, 2011). Overall, the present study attests to a profound disagreement, or even confusion, which is rooted in teachers' and therapists' beliefs around the ideal educational setting for

children with SEN. This finding corroborates similar results of previous research (Feng & Sass, 2010; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012) and shows that further investigation is required around the source and rationale of this disagreement among practitioners who work with these children. Overall, if we are to combine the contradictory answers of the participants, we could conclude that the integration of these children in mainstream schools may be a most beneficial option, provided that it is supported by special classes and provided that it is addressed to children without severe learning difficulties. In other words, full inclusion without exception is not an option that is discussed by Cypriot teachers, who tend to favour a mixed model of inclusion.

Another interesting outcome of this study is how schoolteachers perceive the attitude of the society towards children with SEN. Whilst the majority of mainstream schoolteachers hold the belief that students with disabilities are treated with ignorance and rejection, special schoolteachers mainly think that society treats these children with acceptance and tolerance. The contrasting and contradicting perceptions of the participants reflect a point of contention that is also identified in literature. While worldwide research reveals that children with SEN in mainstream schools are more likely to be rejected compared to their classmates without disabilities (Baydik & Bakkaloglu, 2009; Bourke & Bourgman, 2010; Frederikson, 2010; Monjas et al., 2014), other studies conclude that they are accepted by their peers, even though they do not have opportunities to develop "best" friendships (Avraamidis & Norwich, 2010; Graaf et al., 2012).

The fact that the perception of society's attitude toward children with SEN is highly dependent on the profession of the participants is not accidental. Participants' perception about society is formed by their everyday experience within the educational setting they work. Teachers of mainstream schools are therefore more likely to witness ignorance and rejection towards students with SEN by their classmates who do not face learning disabilities. In other words, within the setting of a mainstream school, it is more likely that children with SEN will stand out of the rest, experiencing discrimination, rejection, and other negative feelings. Teachers of mainstream schools appear to generalise such hostile attitudes as being indicative and representative of the attitudes shown to these children by the wider community. On the contrary, teachers of special

schools work in a much more 'protected' environment in the sense that all children face learning difficulties. Therefore, it is much less likely that children with SEN will become victims of discrimination and rejection by their classmates. Again, teachers of special schools generalize such positive attitudes and draw the conclusion that society as a whole shows acceptance and tolerance. The tight connection of the profession to these contradictory perceptions is perhaps revealing of which answer is closer to the truth. If the mainstream school can be regarded as a miniature of real society, then one should accept the answer of the mainstream schoolteachers as the most reflective of the real attitude of society towards these children.

Noteworthy is the fact that both teachers in mainstream schools and teachers in special schools declared that they act with acceptance and support towards children with SEN. This is crucial to the development of these children, as literature shows that children's successful integration is highly dependent on teachers' knowledge and abilities (Brownell et al., 2012; Feng & Sass, 2010), as well as teachers' support and attitude toward them (Jordan et al., 2010). It is therefore comforting to notice that this condition is met and teachers of all educational settings are willing to contribute to the successful integration of children with SEN. On the other hand, previous research indicates that teachers' attitudes towards children with SEN are strongly influenced by the severity of children's disability (Avraamidis & Norwich, 2002). This creates room for future investigation as to whether the findings of the present study are also contingent on the severity of disabilities faced by the students with which participants interact.

A significant point of convergence among participants is the fact that children with SEN are believed to be marginalised primarily due to the reduced understanding of their needs. Indeed, a study conducted in Cyprus stressed the understanding of marginalisation experienced by children with SEN in primary school settings by listening to children's voice. Marginalisation was conceptualised in four different ways for primary school students, which indicates its complexity and the need for obtaining a better understanding of children's needs (Messiou, 2006). In any case, the fact that the lack of awareness of the needs of children with learning disabilities has emerged as a key reason why a full inclusion is not possible in Cyprus points to a deficit in the education and training of teachers as well as a gap in their continuous professional development,

which has also been stressed in literature (Mag et al., 2017). Relevant to this educational gap is also the reluctance of both types of teacher to rely exclusively on the merits of a mainstream class. This preference for a mixed model of inclusion implies that their belief in the capabilities of a mainstream teacher is not strong enough and, as a result, prefer to rely on the co-existence of a special class which can cover the gaps left by the mainstream one. This is in line with a widespread reluctance showed by the majority of teacher worldwide, as stressed in the literature review section of this study, as well as the concerns of Irish teachers about their own capability of teaching in all-inclusive classrooms.

The second factor that emerges as causing the marginalization of children with SEN is their own inability to cope with the requirements of a mainstream school. This is a surprising finding given the dominant social approach to disabilities, which focuses on the diptych 'person-environment' and attribute disabilities to the inability of the environment (i.e. society) to address the person's needs. In other words, Cyprus teachers appear to remove the weight of responsibility away from themselves and onto the children with SEN, as though school requirements should be something inflexible and rigid to which children should adjust irrespective of their needs, capabilities, and profile.

To sum up, the present research strongly points out that outdated practices towards the integration of children with special educational needs and difficulties should be abandoned. There is not a single, all-fitting-in, monolithic formula of success which can be used for children with SEN. Certainly, mainstream schools can become an ideal educational environment through a careful structure and an ongoing coordination of a range of practitioners and therapists. However, the setting within which their integration will be achieved must be determined based on the needs of each child, as well as the individual's functional and socio-affective condition.

Limitations of the study

The present study used a mixed method research that combines the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. This choice was made for more integrated results of the subject under investigation. Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire from a total of 100 participants, and qualitative data included the interview of 3 participants. The interview is a time-consuming method for collecting data and that explains the limited sample. A bigger sample size is recommended for future studies, for better detailed analysis and discussion.

The most significant limitation of this research is the imbalance in terms of gender representation, as only 6% of the participants were men. This inequality might influence the results of the study, as women are thought to give different perspective in many subjects (Gregory, 1990).

Another limitation that must be pointed out is the confusion experienced by the participants in questions 8 and 9 of the questionnaire. Participants were requested to "make a poll" of some factors, "according points from 1 to 4". The questions should be rephrased as follows: "Please rate the following factors on a rating scale from 1 to 4….". As a result of the vague formulation of these questions, many participants left the questions unanswered or just selected one factor.

Moreover, during the analysis of the data we encountered many missing values on question 5, which asked participants to state which is the most difficult deficiency they have to cope with and why. Many participants left this field empty, so we could not use the results in our investigation.

Finally, the geographical selection of the sample is an important limitation that needs to be mentioned. The study was conducted during the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, which impeded our ability to travel outside Pafos and cover all cities of Cyprus. It also prevented us from selecting our sample on a random basis because we only had a limited number of available participants. Therefore, further studies are required in order for the validity of the research results to be established and generalised to the total population of Cyprus.

Implications for children's inclusion

As mentioned in literature review section, the inclusion of children with SEN is strongly influenced by teachers' attitudes and beliefs (Avraamidis & Norwich, 2002), as well as the school environment and the appropriate classrooms (de Graaf, 2014; Poulisse, 2002). The significance of this study lies in the fact that the teachers' views on children's integration can provide ideas on practices that can be implemented to enhance inclusion in Cyprus' educational system. We believe that it is the teachers' responsibility to engage teaching practices that are likely to facilitate the integration of children with special needs and lay the foundations of a suitable environment which will prevent their marginalisation and exclusion.

From a theoretical point of view, the findings of the present study provide significant insights into whether and to what extent the teachers' profession (normal school or special schoolteachers) affects their attitude and perception around the education of children with SEN. It emerges that special schoolteachers tend to believe that mainstream schools offer better opportunities of integration and reduce the possibility of exclusion, whereas mainstream schoolteachers think that the educational setting should depend on each individual case. Furthermore, the results revealed significant differences between mainstream school and special schoolteachers' beliefs on how the society reacts towards children with SEN. If the rejection that the first group stated is considered as more representative of the wider attitude of the society, this finding is an important implication for the marginalization that these children experience.

From a practical point of view, the outcomes of the present study should be considered for improvements that need to be made both in mainstream and in special schools. Teachers' disagreement about the most appropriate environment for the integration of children with special needs implies that changes and improvements should be implemented to the educational system of Cyprus. External support systems and teams within the schools need to be set up in order to support and guide teachers over their teaching and attitude towards children with SEN.

Future research

The outcomes of the present study should be considered as one step forward in an attempt to address the existing problem of the integration of children with SEN in proper school classrooms, without being marked, discriminated, or bullied. Further studies need to be conducted in order to specify teachers' attitudes and practices on longitudinal qualitative data. This nature of study would examine the transformation across time and deepen our understanding of teachers' attitudes. It would also contribute to improving our understanding of the integration problem.

Moreover, there are some gaps in the present study that need to be filled. For example, further research should be conducted on male participants as well as on participants from other Cyprus cities outside Pafos. As mentioned above, this will consolidate the validity of the present findings and will allow results to be generalized to the total population of Cyprus.

Last but not least, it would be interesting to approach the topic from the perspective of children with SEN, investigating their own beliefs about their teachers' practices and the attitude of their classmates and society in general. Such a study would also allow us draw comparisons between the views held by children who attend mainstream schools and those who attend special schools. In addition, such a pioneering study would give voice to the real protagonists, the children themselves, and provide valuable insights into what is considered to be the ideal educational environment for their successful integration.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire Copy

QUESTIONNAIRE INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN SCHOOL

This document is used by the project team as analysis instrument. This questionnaire wants to do a survey having as the theme The Integration of Children with SEN in school. The aim is to design a correct analysis of the teachers 'opinions and attitudes about the inclusive education and to identify solutions to do it. This is important because one of our Project objectives is examining the whole activity in our school on three sections: 1) didactic and educative 2) organisative 3) cultural – professional.

Q1. What do you think the attitude of the society is towards children with SEN?

1. Isolation tendency

2. Ignorance

3. Social rejection

4. Tolerance

5. Acceptance

6. Support

Q2. What is your attitude towards children with SEN?

1. Acceptance

2. Support

3. Tolerance

4. Indifference

Q3. In the classes you teach are there students with SEN?

1. Yes

2. No

Q4. Please state what kind of needs:

1. Sensitive impairments (see, hear)

2. Physics / motor impairments

3. Mental, intellectual deficiencies

4. Socio-affective impairments (behavioral deficiencies)

5. Learning deficiencies

6. Language deficiencies

7. Others(examples)

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Q5. What deficiency do you think is the most difficult to cope with? Why?

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Q6. What are, in your opinion, the reasons for which the family of a child with SEN chooses a mainstream school instead of a special school?

1. The integration in society possibility

2. Establishing adequate interpersonal relationships

3. Assimilation of daily lifestyle

4. The right at equal chances

Q7. How important do you think the collaboration with the family of a child with SEN is?

1. Very important

2. Important

3. Medium

4. Less important

5. Unimportant

Q8. Make a poll of the following factors which are the basis of learning difficulties, according points from 1 to 4 (1 – the least important, 4 – the most important)?

1. Limited intellectual potential

2. Poverty

3. The parents‟ interest towards the children the lack of individualised teaching

4. Non-using the differentiated assessment ways

Q9. Make a poll of the following factors of integration of a child with SEN in normal school according points from 1 to 4 (1 – the least important, 4 – the most important)?

1. Adapting the curriculum till personalization

2. Differentiated activities and assessment

3. Social – affective relationship between student – student, teacher – student

4. The specialists group in school

Q10. If a child has a deficiency, do you think that he has the right to learn in a mainstream school?

1. Yes

2. No

3. I do not know

Q11. What is, in your opinion, the level of success of a child with SEN in a mainstream school vs a child with SEN in a special school?

1. Very high

2. High

3. Medium

4. Weak

5. Very weak

Q12. What is, in your opinion, the main reason for which a child with SEN is marginalized or excluded from a mainstream school?

1. His incapacity to cope with school requirements

2. Different forms and levels of school failure

3. Reduced understanding of these children's needs

4. Teachers' lack of experience

Q13. What are, in your opinion, the most appropriate solutions to integrate students with SEN?

1. Special schools

2. Integration in normal schools

3. Special classes in normal schools

4. Special schools or normal schools, upon the case.

Q14. If you chose 2 or 3, please write the conditions you think the mainstream schools should have to do a successful integration.

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Q15. If you could choose, you would choose to work:

1. Only with classes without children with SEN

2. With heterogeneous classes

3. With special classes

Q16. If you had a child with SEN, you would like to go:

1. In a special school

2. In a mainstream school

3. In a special class in a mainstream school

Q17. Your age:

1) 20-25

2) 26-30

3) 31-40

4) 41-50

5) 51-60

Q18. Sex:

1. Male

2. Female

Q19. Profession:

Teacher – primary school

Special education teacher