EXPLORING THE ROLE OF 'SPECIAL UNITS' IN CYPRUS SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY

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One of the provisions of the law for special education in Cyprus is for children considered as having special needs to be educated in 'special units'. The purpose of this study is to investigate and observe the way that 'special units' function in the educational environment in Cyprus, paying particular attention to one unit in which five children categorized as having special needs study. In particular, this paper studies the ways in which the different stakeholders (teachers, head-teacher, peers) treat the children of the special unit, as well as, how these children say they, feel in the school environment. The results show that the existence of the 'special unit' and the way it functioned amounted to problematic situations and acted as marginalization factor for the children who attended it.

Within the last two decades many governments in different countries of the world have intensified the efforts for integrating children considered as having special needs in their neighbourhood schools. In the past, children defined as having special needs were educated in *special* schools and institutions separated from their age-mates. The perception that education should be available to all children regardless of their differences and needs has led to the development of inclusive education. The philosophy behind inclusive education has been strengthened in the 1990s (e.g. UNESCO, 1994) and promises to treat all children, categorised as having special needs,
as individuals who have equal rights to education.
The philosophy of inclusive education does not simply refer to the placement of children with special needs into mainstream schools, but it is also concerned with the conditions under which all children are educated effectively (Barton, 1997). Sebba and Ainscow (1996), for example, define inclusive education as the process in which schools try to respond to all pupils as individuals, reviewing the organisation and provision of their curriculum.
Thus, in Cyprus, where this piece of research took place, the integration of children considered as having special needs into mainstream schools constitutes an articulated will of the state. In July 1999 the House of Parliament passed the *Education Act for children with special needs* (Cyprus Republic, 1999) and it was followed by the regulations that govern this Act (Cyprus Republic, 2001). According to this law certain children can be defined as having special needs. These children can receive support or *special education*, which is usually provided individually in segregated settings. The way that *special* education functions in Cyprus has been criticised by a number of researchers as failing because it does not equally include all children in teaching and thereby provide them with equal learning opportunities (e.g. Angelides, 2004; Phtiaka, 2000).
The Education Act for children with special needs together with the regulations that govern it, constitute the statutory framework for the education of children seen as having special needs. This legislation made it clear which child can be considered as having special needs and also specified the necessary provisions for *special* education. One of those provisions is the attendance of children categorised as having special needs in *special units integrated and embodied in mainstream schools* (Cyprus Republic, 2001, p. 1896).
A *special unit* is a class that functions in a mainstream school and in which certain children, categorised as having special needs, study. These children are those whose problems, the seriousness of which is determined by a committee that is specified by the legislation, are diagnosed serious enoughby a committee, as specified by the legislation, to be removed from mainstream classes.. According to the law, the students of a unit should have problems that can coexist in the same classroom, and they should also be of approximately the same age. Although the legislation puts certain criteria for the determination of the number of students that study in a unit, most of the time, this number is around

five students. Children, according to the law, stay in the unit *for as long as their education in it is decided* (Cyprus Republic, 1999, p. 340). Those children that are considered as being able to respond to the requirements of mainstream classes of their age are integrated into them for a number of mainly technical lessons, like physical education and art, and occasionally other lessons, like religion.
The function of *special units* within the last few years in Cyprus raises the following questions:

- How do *special units* function regarding their programme, their staff and the children studying in them?
- To what degree is their function consistent with the principles of inclusive education?
- What modifications do schools make in order to accept the children in these *special units* and to provide them with equal opportunities in teaching and learning*?*
- How do teachers treat these children?
- How do the other children behave towards the children of 'special units'?
- How do the children of units say they feel in the school environment?

This paper will try to answer the above questions. The purpose of this study is to investigate and observe the way that *special units* function in Cyprus, focusing on a particular unit with five children considered as having special needs. Specifically, the authors will study the ways the other stakeholders (teachers, head-teacher, children) treat the children of this unit, as well as how the children themselves feel in the school environment.
Below, we first make a distinction between the terms of *integration* and *inclusion* and then we discuss the way that *special education* functions in Cyprus. After that we analyse the methodology we used and present the analysis of our data where we spot different factors that drive the children of the unit we studied into marginalization. Finally, we consider the implications of those marginalisation factors regarding the education of the children we examined and we give particular suggestions for minimising marginalisation.

Integration and inclusion

Before proceeding further it is important to make a distinction between the terms *inclusion* and *integration*. Although these terms are sometimes used inter-changeably and while their distinction is not so immediate, they do in fact describe different notions. Integration *implies something done to disabled people by non-disabled people according to their standards and conditions - an assimilation model* (CSIE, 2002, p. 2). It also implies that the goal is to integrate someone who has been excluded from the mainstream back into it. Inclusion *better conveys a right to belong to the mainstream and a joint undertaking to end discrimination and to work towards equal opportunities for all pupils* (CSIE, 2002, p. 2).
The focus in inclusive schools is on how to build a system that includes all pupils and which is structured to meet everyone's needs (Stainback et al., 1992). In a broader view, Booth and Ainscow (1998b) argue that inclusion and exclusion are as much about participation and marginalisation in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, poverty and unemployment as they are about traditional special education concerns with students categorised as low in attainment, disabled or deviant in behaviour (p. 2).
In addition, they note that their view of inclusion *involves the processes of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, mainstream curricula, cultures and communities* (p. 2). In this sense, what happens today in Cyprus is better described as integration. The purpose of this study is to recommend ways by which the education of children defined as having special needs, and those who study in *special units* in particular, can move towards more inclusive practices.

The function of *special* education in Cyprus

The education service in Cyprus is highly centralised. The Ministry of Education and Culture controls the curriculum, the textbooks and the other resources needed to deliver it. Local school boards are funded by the Ministry and their role is restricted to matters of building, maintenance and supplies. Schools are directly controlled by the Ministry via the inspectorate and the school head teachers, the latter having less devolved responsibility than in many other educational systems.
The education of children with disabilities in Cyprus has traditionally taken place in special schools, segregating them from their peers (Barnard, 1997). In 1979 this practice was legalised by the law for special education (Cyprus Republic, 1979). The most important provision of this law was that disabled children should be educated in segregated settings. The 1979 law was in force until 1999 when a new law was passed (Cyprus Republic, 1999). Despite the fact that the new law gives the right to all children to attend their neighbourhood school, it has been criticised for continuing to speak only of 'children with special needs' (Phtiaka, 1999).
During the last decade the government of Cyprus has encouraged and supported the education of children considered as having special needs within the mainstream educational system. However, many

children who experience difficulties within schools are often marginalized or even excluded from teaching (Angelides, Charalambous & Vrasidas, 2004). The international research literature describes efforts for transforming the existing arrangements of mainstream schools in ways that would enable schools to increase their internal capacity in order to respond to all pupils (e.g. Ainscow, 1997; Clark et al., 1999). There are also concerns raised about how to respond to pupils who are marginalized or excluded (e.g. Booth and Ainscow, 1998; Clark et al., 1997).

Methodology

The theoretical and epistemological background of the study followed Blumer's (1969) interpretive model of research that is based on the three basic premises of symbolic interactionism. The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. The second premise is that the meanings of such things derive from, or arise out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with things he/she encounters.

For the purpose of data collection, one of the authors, (A. M.), became a participant observer in a primary school in which a *special unit* functioned. She visited the school twice a week for three months. For collecting the data the researcher used different approaches. She observed the functioning of the *special unit* and the ways the different stakeholders (*special* teacher, assistant teachers, children, head-teacher) were involved in lessons. She also observed the integration of children in mainstream classes and how they were treated by the mainstream teachers and the other children. Furthermore, she observed the discussions of teachers in the staffroom and the reactions of children during breaks. For all observations the researcher recorded field-notes. Moreover, the researcher interviewed the *special* teacher, the head of the school and a teaching assistant. Each interview lasted for about one hour. She also conducted a group interview with the children of the *special unit* and two individual interviews with two children that were considered as having special needs and who were not in the unit. These two children studied in a mainstream class and received individual support from a *special* teacher for an hour per day. Moreover, the researcher conducted another five individual interviews and a group interview of eight children who studied in the mainstream classes into which the unit's children were integrated. All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed.

Interviewing children gave rise to a methodological problem that we resolved following the advice of other researchers who used child-interviews (e.g. Messiou, 2002). High on the list of the authors' priorities was the attempt to gain the confidence of children so that they could talk to us freely and share their experiences. Before each interview it was made clear to all children that the interview was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time, or to refuse to answer any of the questions that were asked. Whilst interviewing the unit's children different techniques were used. The most important of these was the interview entailing an analysis of their drawings (Malchiodi, 2001). In children's drawings, Malchiodi (2001) argued, there were certain aspects of children's personalities, besides development and emotions, which when recognized could provide a more complete representation of the children's world. In particular, the researcher asked the children to draw themselves with their friends during a break. While the children were drawing the researcher was next to them and observed and recorded all their expressions and comments, and discussed with them the symbolism of their drawings. Bellas (1998) pointed out that the researcher should have direct contact and communication with the children who draw in order to be better informed about what they draft and how they finally do it.

The analysis of the data

The authors followed the two suggested stages of Erickson (1986): inductive and deductive. When the data were organized , the authors read them three times in order to understand the phenomenon and the social context we were studying. We then formulated certain assertions which stated relations and observations from the studied data. We then examined our data in detail in order to find certain indications that supported or rejected the assertions we had formulated.

Description of the research field

In order to answer the questions set at the beginning, a primary school in Nicosia was selected on the basis of three criteria: First, the head of the school and the teacher of the unit showed an interest in participating in our research. Second, both of them gave us the freedom to participate in the school activities, and thirdly, the authors considered this unit to be a *carefully-weighed up* case in relation to the other units, the authors had access to (number of children, problems of children, number of teaching assistants, time of integration into mainstream classes).

In the *special unit* there were five children, three boys and two girls: Marios, Nicolas, Peter, Maria and Katerina (pseudonyms). They were between seven and eight years old. Marios seemed to be a more

serious case. He had cerebral palsy, he could not serve himself and needed a full-time teaching assistant. Nicolas was assessed as hyperactive and with serious speech problems. Peter was categorized as a child with serious learning difficulties and with serious problems in hand mobility. Maria was categorized as having diminished concentration and problems in hand mobility. Katerina was evaluated as a child with serious learning difficulties that arose from her poor home environment. The two girls were integrated in mainstream classes for three lessons: Art, Religion and Physical Education. Nicolas and Peter were integrated in the same lessons but in a different class, having with them the teaching assistant of the unit. According to the *special* teacher of the unit, without the teaching assistant *the two boys did not do anything*.

The teacher of the unit is under the category of *special* teachers according to the educational system of Cyprus. As we have already noted, in the unit there are two teaching assistants, one that is solely responsible for Marios and another one that helps generally in the unit.

According to the regulations that govern the units there is no particular curriculum that should be followed but *special* teachers do whatever they consider necessary according to the cases of their students. There is no official policy stating which or how many lessons children should be taught. The *special* teacher of the unit, as she herself said, teaches individually and in groups. When some children are integrated into mainstream classes she works with the rest individually. When all children are in the class she conducts some group activities. In addition, as she pointed out, she has very little collaboration with the teachers of mainstream classes, because there is no time in the school programme for this, and she added that she did not think it was necessary.

Marginalization factors

In analysing the data the researchers formulated three assertions. They considered that these assertions were related to factors that seemed to marginalize the children of the *special unit.* First, the way the *special unit* functioned, including the implementation of the policy of the school and the law that governs *special* education, marginalized the children that studied in it. Second, the way the children of the *special unit* were integrated into mainstream classes, and third, the role of the other children of the school acted as a marginalization factor for the children that studied in the unit. These issues overlap, are interrelated, and difficult to separate. The researchers have deliberately separated these issues to help the reader understand the arguments and findings of the research.

The way the *special unit* functions marginalizes

Studying the way the *special unit* functioned on a daily basis it seemed that the law, which governs it, as well as the general policy of the school regarding the function of the unit, marginalized the children who studied in it. The first element that seems to reinforce our assertion is the very idea of the existence of *special units* as specified by the law (Cyprus Republic, 1999). Given that from the beginning the researchers made it clear that they supported the inclusive approach, the idea of the existence of *special units* in the law is a marginalizing factor, because, while as a principle of inclusive education their goal was the teaching of *all* children in their neighbourhood schools together with their age-mates. In the case of *special units* children were taught separately in a *special* classroom, the only criterion for this being the seriousness of their problem, on the basis of which they were categorised as having special needs. In addition, for most of the children of the unit, the school they attended was not the school of their neighbourhood but the closest school to their home that had a *special unit*. For one boy this school was over 10 kilometres away from his house.

A second element which seems to support the assertion was the label that was outside the classroom that housed the *special unit*: *Special Education Classroom*. Despite the fact that the rest of the classrooms had no labels with their names on them the classroom of the *special unit* had one. Discussing this issue with the head of the school the researchers remarked that this label might be divisive. She disagreed saying:

> *In the same way the other classrooms are called A1 or A2, the room for teachers is called staffroom, my office is called the office of the headteacher, there is this one room that is called* special education classroom.

The *special* teacher had a slightly different view:

> *Regardless of what is written on it, here is a* special unit *and not a* special education classroom.

Because of the way that *special* education has traditionally functioned in Cyprus where children categorised as being in this field were educated in *special* schools separated from their age-mates, the phrase *special* education retains a connotation that marginalizes. Furthermore, given that traditionally in Cyprus the phrase *special education* has been linked to disability, handicap, learning difficulties, and generally differentiates, the above label leads to negative thoughts and reactions, and hence, to marginalization.

In the researchers' opinion, this label stigmatises and labels the children that study in the unit. Teachers and children often referred to the children of the *special unit* as the *children from special education*. The teachers may give the excuse that they are merely using a term in its traditional way, as far as the children were concerned however, we felt that the label had a significant role to play in the forming of their attitude (in combination, of course, with some other factors).

This assertion was reinforced by what the researchers learnt from within the *special unit.*. From the interviews with the children (with the help of drawings) it appeared that their school world revolved around their classroom where they spent most of their time. All children, orally or through their drawings indicated that most of the time they played amongst themselves, and that their only friends were children from the *special unit*. For example, all children drew one or two children together with themselves and when they were asked to name them they only referred to the names of the children of the *special unit*. Moreover, the drawings of the children took up only a small part of the paper while they represented themselves as very small indeed. According to Tomas and Silk (1997) this fact symbolises belittlement and loneliness because the size of the figure indicates the importance of the person drawn. The paintings from the tombs of Ancient Egypt where Pharaohs and all the distinguished persons of that era were drawn on a bigger scale than the rest of the people provide an example. Three out of the five children divided their drawings with a horizontal line. When they were asked what that line meant they said that the top part was the playground where the other children played. This finding was reinforced by the observations that the children of the *special unit* spent most of their time in their class.

The way integration took place marginalized

A second issue that emerged concerned the way the children of the unit were integrated into mainstream classes. In analysing the data it seemed the school and the teachers of mainstream classes did not have a particular policy or a programme for differentiating the curriculum or their teaching methods in order to provide equal opportunities to teaching and learning for all children, including the children who studied in the *special unit*. According to the teachers, whatever they did was done incidentally according to the initiative of each teacher, without organisation and planning and without collaboration between mainstream teachers and the *special* teacher of the unit. The following vignette supports this argument.

Vignette: 'If you have finished go to your class'

It was an art lesson in the mainstream second grade into which two girls of the unit had been integrated. The children were sitting in groups of six. The two children entered the room a few minutes after the lesson had begun. They seemed happy and the first sat at a desk next to the teacher's desk and the other one at another desk at the back of the room. These seats were empty, and according to the teacher , the girls always sat there.

The subject of the lesson was the Olympic games. First the teacher showed some selected drawings by children from other classes. Then, she showed the figures of -Phivos and Athina (the mascots of the Olympic games) and asked the children to draw a picture with any theme that was related to the Olympic games. For the two children from the unit she made the outline of the figures on two pieces of paper and asked them to colour them in. Those children who had finished, stood up and showed their drawings to the rest of the class. After receiving applause they returned to their seats. The same happened with the two girls. Maria, one of the girls from the unit, raised her hand and said that she had finished her drawing. 'If you have finished go to your class' was the response of the teacher. Maria ignored her and stayed in her seat. 'Maria, since you have finished you should go to your class', she repeated. Then, Maria took her drawing and rushed out of the classroom. When the second girl realised that Maria had left, she took her drawing and left as well, without saying anything to the teacher.

The above vignette showed a lesson into which two children from the *special unit* were integrated. The teacher presented the subject of the lesson and when she reached the stage where the children had to draw she differentiated her approach towards the two children of the unit. While the rest of the children were asked to draw a scene from the Olympics the two girls were asked to colour the figures of Phivos and Athina. When they finish their drawings, before the end of the lesson, the teacher asked them *to go to their class*.

After studying this vignette, and also the way the children of the unit were integrated into mainstream classes in general, it seemed that the whole state of affairs created situations of marginalization for them. The way they were integrated seems to be problematic, lacking any essential organisation or planning. Integration took place simply to show that there is physical integration, without the necessary

background and the effort expected from the school. Analysing the above incident in relation to other lessons, in the researchers' opinion seemed to be the emergence of the marginalization of the children of the *special unit*. The policy of the school, the practice of the teacher, and the fact that the teacher of the mainstream class did not collaborate with the *special* teacher of the unit, strengthened this conclusion.

More specifically, after looking at the drawings of the children in the class referred to above, the task did not differ from what the two girls from the special unit could not have done. However, the teacher differentiated the activity for the two girls and asked them simply to colour the figures, without giving them the chance to try the activity of the other children. The colouring of the figure of the mascots excluded the two girls from the body of the class and prevented from drawing freely whatever they wanted, like the other children, and at the same time it sent the message to the rest of the class that they might not be able to do anything else besides a simple colouring exercise.

When it was discussed with the teacher the way she differentiated her teaching in the different lessons observed, and the above one in particular, it became clear that the activities she chose to do were conceived by her alone without any input from the teacher of the unit and without having a particular action plan that would be based on the differentiation of the curriculum. Analysing the above incident in particular, and by reminding her of incidents from other lessons observed where the two girls were integrated, she emphasised that the children who come from the unit have limited abilities and that they can neither follow the curriculum of the class nor engage in the activities the other children do. For this reason, as she pointed out, she always gives them something easier to do, even though she has neither a particular program on the basis of which she plans her activities nor any communication with the *special* teacher in order to set parallel teaching aims.

In addition, a division between the children of the mainstream class and the children of the 'special' unit can be traced in the above vignette. The teacher asked the two girls to go to their class when they had finished their colouring. This act sent messages that each child has his/her class and that the children of the unit are visitors for a period of time, they come, but they cannot stay. Moreover, it sent the message that they are different and belong somewhere else. Although the children of the mainstream class did not show by their behaviour anything that would indicate rejection or non-acceptance, the role of the teacher seemed to be decisive. The two girls did not want to leave. The teacher could, for example, have waited until the break, when, the children would naturally have gone to their class. Yet, the way the second girl left the classroom showed once more elements of marginalization. She left the room without asking permission from the teacher (although it was obvious where she was going) and the teacher seemed not to care where she went, as she would if another child had left the room in that way. If integration is going to take place it is important to follow some basic *equity* principles in classrooms in order to minimise marginalization and to move towards more inclusive forms of education. Ainscow (1998) has said that the processes of exclusion and inclusion occur in the same classroom. Therefore, ways should be found for increasing participation and decreasing marginalization.

Marginalization by children

Studying ther data another factor that seemed to marginalize the children of the unit was the behaviour of the other children in the school. Resulting from the interviews held with children it seemed that they did not want to be associated with the children of the unit. The reasons for this are perhaps laid in the factor analysed above. This finding could be supported by observations as well.

More specifically, a large number of children from classes that did not have any contact with the children of the unit referred to them as *retarded* when they talked about these children. It would appear that these children had no actual contact with the children of ***the*** *special unit*. The children of the classes into which they were integrated referred to them as *special education children*. When they were asked particular children if they kept company with the children of the unit they replied that they did not. This was confirmed by observations. The justifications they gave were convincing. Given that the children of the unit were between 7 and 8 years old, all the older children asked said that they kept company with their age-mates and their classmates and not with children of the special unit. When children from the classes into which the children of the unit were integrated were asked the answers were the same but with different excuses. For example one child told us:

> *They have got their own friends and we have got our own … they keep company with the special education children and we keep company with the children of our class.*

One girl, when asked if she played with the children of the unit, answered:

> *We see them very little … they come for the lessons and leave … during breaks we do not see them, how can we play with them?*

Children who shared the same desk as the children of the *special unit* , they gave similar answers. One girl, for example, said of the girl from the *special unit* who sat next to her:

> *O.K., she comes to our class and sits with me … is it necessary for us to be friends or to play together? I have got other friends from my class and we are together every day.*

Another student, a boy, said:

> *I have other friends and I do not want to have the children of the unit as my friends … Do you know that during religion they disturb us and the teacher sends them to their class? I do not want them to disturb the lessons.*

As mentioned earlier, these attitudes might be directed by factors analysed. The behaviour of children is socially constructed within the school and this construction might take place with the unconscious help of teachers (Angelides et al., 2004). The different levels of marginalization described above might influence the way children behave.

The fact that the rest of the children did not keep company with the children of the *special unit* was supported by our observations. It was also supported by the comments of the *special* teacher and the head of the school, although they did not consider this situation to be an element of marginalization. The *special* teacher stated:

> *The children of the unit play by themselves; they form relationships among themselves and during breaks play together … I don't think that this is an element of marginalization, it is natural … this happens in all the classes of the school. When, for instance, a child is fat or dirty the rest of the children do not want that child in their company … and these children are naturally different, so they play by themselves.*

This statement, however, contains many contradictions. First, the teacher denies that marginalization occurs, and then, she states that the division is natural and that children of the unit are *naturally* isolated from the rest of the children. Commenting on this issue the head of the school made the following remark:

> *The rest of the children accept the children of the unit very well. For example, in the classes where they are integrated they work in the same groups; during breaks when it is needed they wheel the boy with the wheel-chair, and if Nicolas leaves school without permission they come to my office and inform me about it. … Generally, they accept these children; there is no problem.*

The comments of the head-teacher contain contradictions as well. She talks about acceptance but the examples she gives, namely that the rest of the children accept the children of the unit in their classes and work with them in the same groups, refer to behaviour on the part of these students which is not voluntary but imposed on them by the school system. In addition, the reference to Nicolas leaving school and the rest of the children rushing to her office to inform her about it, indicates division rather than acceptance. The words of these two teachers seem to confirm what we have said above, namely that teachers, perhaps unconsciously, aid the construction of children's divisive behaviour. These findings echo other researchers. (e.g. Allan, 1998; Messiou, 2002) where they explain how children marginalise some of their classmates.

Conclusions

Returning to the initial questions it seems that the existence of the *special* unit and the way it functions creates the problematic situations and act as marginalization factors for the children who study in it. Panteliadou (1995) agrees with this conclusion, arguing that *special classes* (*special units* in Cyprus) lead children away from the gates of mainstream schools while the selection of children who will attend *special classes* leaves a lot of room for not only subjective judgement but also high-handed acts. The philosophy is based on the principles of inclusive education: all children study in the same schools and classrooms together with their age-mates. This contradicts the whole concept of *special units*. Meanwhile, because their existence is enshrined in current legislation, until the law is changed, one should think of ways to create more inclusive conditions for children in *special units*.

The first factor considered necessary for developing a more inclusive character in *special units* is that they should operate on the basis of a particular curriculum in order to avoid situations where *special* teachers exclusively determine the curriculum. It is important to have a curriculum that will move in parallel with the curriculum of mainstream classes, but in a differentiated form, and on the basis of which *special units* will function (see Tomlinson, 2003). In order to get this right, though, collaboration among all stakeholders is needed (teachers, *special* teachers, head-teacher, parents, students). The most important collaboration is the one between the teachers of the units and the teachers of mainstream classes because the organisation and coordination of the programme of each child is dependent on them. In this way, teaching in mainstream classes and teaching in special units can work as supplementary and not as independent processes.

In the Cyprus school time-table, however, there is no time for collaboration between the two, a factor that seems to be behind many of the problems encountered. Because of the existing situation, teachers work independently and whatever collaboration occurred, happened during breaks. Therefore, another suggestion for the better functioning of *special units* is to be specific time-tabled periods for collaboration between *special* teachers and teachers of mainstream classes in order to coordinate the curriculum and ways for dealing with each individual child (Angelides, 2004).

Another theme that seemed to recur in the data were the divisive practices that teachers engaged in. These divisive practices seemed to be constructed within the workplace through norms that transfer from generation to generation (or from one academic year to the next). The historical context in which *special* education has developed in Cyprus is largely to blame for this state of affairs. Traditionally, *special* education was provided in segregated settings and since then the term has been connected with handicap and disability. This tradition, in combination with the existing legislation, which marginalizes, might have influenced teachers and led them to such divisive practices. All these elements together seem to have created conditions of marginalization that influence the behaviours of children. There was a culture between teachers and students that tended to marginalize the children of the unit. A similar finding was spotted in another research which studied children categorised as having special needs in general (Angelides, Charalambous & Vrasidas, 2004).

A point that can be drawn from the above discussion is the need to promote the notion of difference in Cyprus schools, for children and teachers. They all need to learn to appreciate the different because it can enrich learning and the school experiences of students. To achieve this, Johnson & Johnson (2003) argue that teaching in the classroom should be structured in such a way as to construct positive relations between different students, to minimise barriers and to promote high levels of interaction that will lead to mutual respect, commitment and friendliness.

This study observed the way a *special* unit functioned and presented different factors that led to marginalization. Some significant issues are worthy of further research. The most important of them is best described as the micropolitical interests that in many instances seemed to be at work in different situations. This research gave the feeling that behind the functioning of the *special* unit certain other interests were being served. The directives of policy makers seem mainly to serve the needs of the educational system and those who work for it rather than the interests of children themselves (Barton, 1988). The authors, therefore encourage future researchers to deal particularly with issues of micropolitics in relation to *special units*, but also in relation to inclusive education in general.

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