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Preferences of students with general learning difficulties for different service delivery modes

Anastasia Vlachou*, Eleni Didaskalou and Effi Argyrakouli

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This study was designed to elicit the views and preferences of primary education students' with general learning difficulties concerning different service delivery modes. The main areas to be investigated were: (a) their current educational provision, (b) alternative modes of provision and (c) the most appropriate provider (mainstream or special needs teacher) of educational support. The sample consisted of 95 students in grades 2–6 who voluntarily participated in the study. Interviews, including seven questions concerning students' views on and preferences for different educational settings (regular classroom without additional support, resource room, in-class support), were employed for gathering data. The findings clearly confirmed our hypotheses that: (a) students do hold preferences about where and by whom they should be taught, and (b) they do not unanimously prefer one service delivery mode over another. While the majority of the students preferred the resource room over the regular class, it is significant, at the same time, that almost one-third of the participants preferred the regular classroom. Students' preference for educational setting (regular classroom or resource room) was significantly influenced by their view of which setting provides more academic benefits. Regarding their preference for the most appropriate provider of support, the great majority preferred receiving help from the special education teacher. Given that in-class support is not practised in Greek schools and none of the participants had any experience of systematic in-class support provided by a special teacher, it was surprising to establish that almost one-half of the students preferred to receive the additional support within the regular class. Students' preference for a service delivery mode (pull-out or in-class support) was significantly influenced by: (a) their preference of educational setting (regular classroom or resource room), and (b) their views of which setting provided greater academic benefit.

Keywords: Learning difficulties; Preferences; In-class support; Resource settings; Service delivery modes

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Introduction

The issue of inclusive education continues to dominate much of the international policy agenda and excite considerable debate between academics, professionals, parents and other stakeholders. However, as Norwich and Kelly (2004) indicated:

While inclusive educational policies continue to generate intense debate, there is comparatively little systematic research on its many facets. One important facet of the inclusion question is children’s own perspectives on their special educational provision. (p. 43)

This paper reports on and discusses a recent research project considered to contribute to this emerging field by examining the views of some 95 Greek students identified as having general learning difficulties. This is the first time that such an exercise has been conducted in Greece and comes at a time when policy-makers are considering the next steps in developing more inclusive provision.

Contexts

Ascertaining children’s views presents a number of challenges (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Christensen & James, 2000; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Norwich & Kelly, 2004); however, as two recent contributors (Nordmann, 2001; Messiou, 2002) point out, their accounts should be considered a necessary prerequisite for supporting more inclusive provision. Other researchers (Harris, 2002; Roose & John, 2003) have noted that children are key informants in their own right, bringing unique understandings to what is a complex process. By attempting to ascertain their views, we are therefore not only ensuring their voices are heard, but also that their insights and experiences inform decision-making (Norwich & Kelly, 2004), and potentially contribute to improvements in the field (Davies & Watson, 2001).

In previous attempts to surface children’s views (Klingner et al., 1998; Vaughn & Klingner, 1998), it appeared that students had distinct views over the type of provision they preferred, opting for a continuum of services to be available rather than reliance on any particular approach. In much of this previous work, researchers focused on the positive aspects of receiving individually appropriate help with learning, and the negative aspects of experiencing stigma and devaluation (Vaughn & Bos, 1987; Jenkins & Heinen, 1989; Pugach & Wesson, 1995; Padeliadu & Zigmond, 1996; Norwich, 1997).

These tensions might well be regarded as dilemmatic in form, embodied in the systems, structures and practices schools have established to promote inclusion (Clark et al., 1997, 1999). The analysis of such dilemmas extends well beyond simply developing an understanding of some local difficulties within the Greek or any other context; it is, on the contrary, a means of gaining insight into fundamental social and educational contradictions (Clark et al., 1995, 1997). A series of such contradictions arise when educational systems attempt to reconcile the essentially individualized process and outcomes of learning on the one hand, and the delivery of ‘education’ as a social good in a universal common form to all learners on the other hand. This study has therefore to be viewed as an integral part of wider theoretical considerations that regard current and future special education service delivery modes as no more than
attempted temporary resolutions of enduring dilemmas endemic in mass education (Clark et al., 1999).

In light of this, we were interested to test, in the Greek context, the following assumptions: (a) students do hold preferences about where and by whom they should be taught, and (b) they do not unanimously prefer one service delivery mode over another. As in-class support is being actively discussed by policy-makers as a possible way of developing more inclusive provision, this is a particularly opportune time to undertake this research. Currently, inclusive education in Greece is best understood as ‘integrationist’ in the sense that it reflects thinking and practices reminiscent of approaches adopted in many countries in the 1970s (Lampropoulou & Padeliadu, 1995). For instance, the most recent Act 2817/2000 on the ‘Education of Persons with Special Needs’ (Greek Government Official Journal, 2000) recommended only limited forms of inclusion, while its legal arrangements focused on a categorical system of ‘special educational needs’ that promotes further the already prevalent notions of defectology (Vlachou et al., 2003).

According to the taxonomy of the 2000 Act, the term ‘special educational needs’ includes the following categories: mental disability; deaf and hearing impairments; blind and visual impairments; speech and language difficulties; specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia); complex cognitive, emotional and social difficulties; and autism and other developmental disorders. Currently, three main generic terms serve as an umbrella for the above eight categories:

1. **learning disabilities**, due to mental, visual, hearing and motor impairments or due to emotional disturbances.
2. **general learning difficulties**, due to environmental, social, cultural and economic disadvantage.
3. **specific learning difficulties**, due to conditions such as perceptual disabilities, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and apraxia and ADD/ADHD.

Actual provision, however, is somewhat limited, taking one of three forms: placement in a special school; withdrawal from a mainstream classroom to a resource room or placement in a mainstream classroom without any form of additional support. In either case, any additional provision extends only to the primary phase for once students enter the secondary phase, they have to take their chance in the ordinary classroom. This has led some commentators (Zoniou-Sideri, 2000; Vlachou-Balafouti, 2001) to describe the current situation as being ‘inclusionist’ only in so far as it involves locational integration.

However, if it is the intention of the government to develop a more inclusive approach, a strong case can be made for ascertaining the views of the largest beneficiaries of any move to in-class support—those designated as having ‘learning difficulties’, general/specific, currently comprising 56.2% of the special needs population, according to the Ministry of Education (http://www.pi-schools.gr). There is, though, no officially designated screening programme or systematic individual diagnostic assessment to ensure there is consistency (see below) in the identification of these students, with placement frequently resulting from the subjective decisions
made at school level by regular and special teachers (Papadopoulos, 1997). Further, in some of the largest cities, there are some specialist diagnostic centres undertaking individual assessments, but these cover only a small proportion of the student population. An indication of this can be gauged from a recent study (Vlachou, in press), which found that only 196 of 759 students in 63 resource rooms across Greece had been referred through one of these diagnostic centres.

**Design and aims of the study**

As we set out to discover students’ views on both general and specific issues relating to their educational provision, current forms of support and proposed new structures, a two-stage approach in formulating the interviews was adopted. The first stage would involve gathering responses to three general areas. What, then, are students’ views on:

- current educational provision?
- alternative modes of provision?
- the most appropriate provider (mainstream or special needs teacher) of educational support?

The second stage would involve gathering information on a number of more specific research questions:

1. Is a resource room setting preferable to the regular class? (i.e. current educational provision)
2. Is a resource room setting preferable to in-class support? (i.e. alternative hypothetical mode of provision)
3. Is the special needs teacher preferred as the provider of additional support over the class teacher?
4. What factors influence students’ preference?
5. Which of the locations, resource room or regular classroom, do students associate with academic and social outcomes?
6. What views do the students have on the appropriateness or otherwise of the work set in the resource room and the regular classroom?

As in-class support is not a practice in Greek schools, we introduced it as an alternative, albeit a hypothetical form of support. The findings reported in this study are confined by shortage of space to students’ preferences of different service delivery modes, that is to questions 1, 2, 3, and 4, above. Findings pertaining to questions 5 and 6 will be reported elsewhere.

**Methods**

**Sampling**

Fifteen middle-sized (100–120 students) primary schools from seven cities located in central Greece participated in the study. The schools were selected because they were
public schools with, in socio-economic terms, a mixed catchment and a resource room. Permission was sought and granted by the Ministry of Education to approach the 165 students who attended a resource room. From this initial group, a total of 95 students in grades 2–6 voluntarily participated and constituted the final sample of the study. The age range of the students extended from 7 to 13 years of age (M = 9.10, Sd = 1.32). The majority of the participants (n = 59, 62.1%) were male, 35 were female (36.8%), while data were not available in one case.

Immigrant students and those students identified as having learning disabilities and/or specific learning difficulties (see above) were not included in the sample. As there is no official identification system in Greece (see above), the researchers sought to address this issue by interviewing the special teacher prior to establishing the final sample to be interviewed. The main interview questions referred to issues such as: (a) socio-demographic characteristics of the students, (b) criteria and procedures used to determine student eligibility for resource room support and (c) time spent in the resource room setting. The interviews revealed that none of the participant students had an official diagnosis, all were native Greek speakers and mainly from low and medium socio-economic status groups (39% and 46% respectively), according to their parents’ educational level and profession. According to special teachers’ responses, almost 13% of the participant children were facing serious familial problems and/or social and economic disadvantage.

The criteria used for determining student eligibility for resource room support were loosely described in terms of children’s academic and social difficulties to access the non-differentiated National Curriculum. The participant students were mainly described in terms of their academic/learning and social characteristics/behaviours. In particular, the great majority of students were characterized as ‘slow learners’, ‘poor readers’, ‘underachievers’ or ‘children who are struggling academically’. Further descriptions included: introvert children or children with aggressive/disruptive behaviour, students with concentration difficulties, with gaps in learning due to cumulative absences from school, with low academic self-concept and with lack of motivation, as well as disaffected students with negative attitudes to school, teachers and the process of learning. Of the sample, more students (60.24%) were recorded as having difficulties in both language and mathematics/numeracy (i.e. difficulties in basic reading skills, reading comprehension, oral and written expression, mathematics calculation and mathematics reasoning), while 30.12% of the students had difficulties mainly in language and eight students (9.63%) had difficulties only in mathematics.

The amount of time spent in a resource room varied. More than half of the sample (55 students) spent from 1 to 3 hours (23.2%) and 4 to 6 hours (34.7%) per week in the resource room. There were also 15 students (15.8%) who had 7 to 9 hours of instruction per week in the resource room setting and 13 students who had 10 to 12 hours per week, and only a small percentage (8.4%) attended the resource room for 13 to 15 hours per week or more (3.2%).

Special teachers’ responses were cross-checked through informal discussions with the relevant general education teachers. Unfortunately, because the criteria used by
both the class and special teacher to describe the difficulties of the students were of a rather general nature, this somewhat limits the validity and generalizability of the results.

**The interview process**

Interviews were used because they had proved effective in a number of previous studies designed to elicit students’ views and preferences (Vaughn & Bos, 1987; Cooper, 1993; Tisdall & Dawson, 1994; Padeliadu, 1995; Padeliadu & Zigmond, 1996; Vlachou, 1997). The actual interview used drew extensively from the work of Padeliadu (1995), Jenkins & Heinen (1989) and Klingner *et al.* (1998), and consisted of seven questions concerning students’ views and preferences on different educational settings (regular classroom without additional support, resource room, in-class support), modified to take account of the Greek context. The following are examples of the phrasing of the questions used:

- **Warm up:** What grade are you in this year?
  Who is your teacher?
  How many students are in your class?
  What do you like to do in class in your spare time (when you have spare time)?

- **Question 1:** If you are having a lot of difficulties with your [identified school subject], and need extra help, would you rather get this help from Mr/Mrs … [special education teacher] or from Mr/Mrs … [regular education teacher]?

- **Question 2:** If you are having a lot of difficulties with your [identified school subject], and need extra help, would you rather go to Mr/Mrs … [special education teacher] in the classroom for help or would you rather have Mr/Mrs … [special education teacher] come to your classroom to help you?

For each student questioned, a school subject for which they received additional help was identified with the aid of the special education teacher (e.g. reading, maths, etc.), and formed the basis for this part of the interview. After each response, interviewers asked students to give a reason(s) for their choice.

Following a period of familiarization, children were individually interviewed in a quiet location, other than their regular classroom. Each interview was tape recorded and lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. Children were assured that their responses would remain confidential. To make sure that students would be familiar with their classmates and the procedures of their classroom—both regular and resource settings—school interviews were conducted during spring 2004.

**Analysis and coding procedures**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, creating a numbered interview protocol for each participant student. The analysis and coding of responses proceeded in two phases. The first phase referred to the analysis of responses to closed-form interview questions in which the percentage of respondents who indicated each response option
for each item was calculated. Frequencies were calculated for all categorical measures. Furthermore, relationships were explored (a) between all categorical variables and subject characteristics such as: gender, grade and hours of instruction per week in the resource room, and (b) among different categorical variables (i.e. preferences for location of receiving help and person providing help, or preferences for location of receiving help and location yielding more academic benefits). For this analysis, cross-tabs and chi-square tests were used. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to evaluate the significance of these tests.

The second phase referred to the analysis of responses to open-form questions concerned mainly with students’ reasoning for particular preferences. To develop a category system for the responses to the open-form questions all the transcribed interviews were content analysed in terms of emergent categories and themes on the one hand, and the research questions on the other (Borg & Gall, 1989). At this stage, ten transcripts were also coded by a second person to enhance credibility of coding. More than 89% agreement was found between the two researchers’ coding following manual calculations of percentage of agreement as to the presence of the coded theme (Boyatzis, 1998). Throughout this process there was also an exhaustive search for unique data.

Results

The results of the interviews were organized into three categories of responses: (a) students’ preference for educational setting: regular classroom without any kind of additional support or resource room (current provision), (b) students’ preference for the person providing help and (c) students’ preferred location for receiving additional support: resource room or in-class support (alternative hypothesized mode of provision).

Preference for educational setting: regular classroom or resource room

According to the responses, 53.7% (51, N = 93) of the students preferred the resource room while 38.9% (37, N = 93) preferred their regular classroom; only five students (5.3%, N = 93) expressed no preference. Students’ preference of educational setting was not statistically affected by gender, grade and hours of instruction in the resource room. However, their preference was significantly influenced by their view of which setting provided most academic benefits. More students who reported that their learning outcomes were improved in the resource room preferred that type of setting (63.6%) than the regular classroom (36.4%) and, correspondingly, more students who reported that they learned better in the regular classroom preferred the regular (92.6%) rather than the resource room (7.4%); this difference in proportions being significant [χ² (1, n = 60) = 19.86, p = 0.000]. Moreover, more students who reported that they learned more effectively in the resource room preferred going to this type of setting (77.1%) rather than the regular classroom (22.9%) [χ² (1, n = 87) = 7.55, p = 0.006].
The most common reasons for preferring the resource room were that: they were doing less and easier work; learning and understanding things better; receiving more help, having more fun and participating in more extra-curricular activities:

I prefer Mrs’ … class [resource room] because we have fewer lessons, it’s easier there and the teacher helps me. (Interview no. 14)

I prefer going to Mr’s … class [resource room] because I understand things better. (no. 4)

Further, several structural characteristics of this setting such as: less pupils, less noise and individualization in terms of teaching and support, as well as the positive climate and the more interactive nature of the resource room, were the most frequently identified by those who preferred the resource room setting:

I prefer going to Mrs’ … class [resource room] because there are not many kids there, it’s not noisy, there are only few kids so Mrs … can help each one. (no. 53)

I prefer going to Mrs’ … class [resource room] because it’s quieter and Mrs … helps us. (no. 51)

For the students who preferred the regular class the main justifications were: being with their friends and peers; having a wider range of subjects and learning activities; preferring to be with their regular teacher and regarding the mainstream class as the ‘natural’ location for their education. Comments such as: ‘because this is my class and I want to move on’, ‘this is where my ordinary teacher is’ and ‘I want to be in my class with my teacher’ were typical of students expressing these preferences.

Preference for the individual providing help: regular or special teacher

Almost two-thirds of the participants (64.2%, $N = 93$) preferred receiving additional help from their special teacher, while only 26.3% ($N = 93$) preferred receiving help from their regular teacher. The remaining students (7.4%) were unable to choose between the two types of teachers. Although 64.2% of the students preferred to receive help from their special teacher, this preference was not significantly affected either by gender and grade or by hours of instruction in the resource room setting. However, there was a statistically significant difference between teacher preference and classroom preference [$\chi^2 (1, n = 85) = 24.81, p = 0.000$]. In particular, more students who preferred the resource room setting also preferred receiving help from the special teacher (89.9%) rather than the regular teacher (10.1%). There was also a relationship between preference for the individual providing help and the setting students viewed as providing more academic benefits. Chi-square tests revealed that more students who said that both children generally and they themselves learned better in the resource room preferred to receive help from the special teacher (87% and 80.7% respectively) rather than the regular teacher (13% and 19.3% respectively). Again, these differences were significant [$\chi^2 (1, n = 56) = 7.59, p = 0.006; \chi^2 (1, n = 83) = 22.37, p = 0.000$ respectively].

There were three main reasons for preferring to receive help from the special education teacher. The first related to the amount of help they received, and the
second to their view that the special teacher taught in such a way that they learned more effectively. These views are characterized by the following comments:

I prefer Mrs … [special teacher] because she helps me with everything. Mrs … [regular teacher] does not help me at all. (no. 36)

Mrs … [special teacher] because she knows such things. Mr … [regular teacher] can’t explain things so I can learn them well, but Mrs … [special teacher] knows how to explain things and kids can learn. (no. 78)

The third reason related to the personal qualities of the special teacher. The most valued qualities mentioned by the students were ‘goodness’ and/or ‘kindness’. For some students, this was interpreted quite broadly and included: being supportive, flexible, easy-going, tolerant and calm; not reprimanding them when they made mistakes; not being too strict, and having a close relationship with the students:

I prefer Mrs … [special teacher] to help me because I learn more things from her, she gives me handouts to work on, and if I don’t understand something we do in Mr’s … class [regular classroom], she explains it to me. (no. 68)

I prefer Mrs … [special teacher] to help me because she teaches me better, she has a lot of pictures and she also gave me a gift. She is nice and pretty. (no. 33)

For others, however, ‘goodness’ and/or ‘kindness’ were interpreted much more narrowly and included: assigning less and easier work, and generally being less demanding than the regular teacher:

The [special] teacher is good—he doesn’t ask us a lot and when we are done with the lessons we play. (no. 4)

I would like Mr … [special teacher] to help me because he is good, he doesn’t ask us difficult things, because we have less things to do. (no. 70)

The students who preferred to receive additional help from the regular education teacher did so because the regular teacher was viewed either as their ‘favourite’ or simply as ‘their teacher’—the teacher with whom they spent together many hours of the school day. In this case, the qualities of the regular education teacher most appreciated by the students were a willingness to help and explain things and not reprimanding them when they made mistakes. These qualities were often referred to in a general way as ‘kindness’.

Preferred location for receiving additional help: pull-out or in-class support

Although all the students had experience of working in a resource room, none had any experience of systematic in-class support provided by a specialist teacher. To gauge their views on this type of provision, we introduced this as a hypothetical form of provision they might like to receive. Their responses to this possibility are interesting, with the number of students who preferred to receive help in the resource room setting (48.4%) and those who preferred to receive help in their regular classroom from their special teacher (46.3%) divided almost evenly. Two students expressed no preference; one remained undecided and one student remained insistent that he
preferred being in his regular class without any additional support. Students’ preferences for the location of receiving additional help was not significantly affected by gender, grade and hours of instruction in the resource room setting. But as indicated in Table 1, the preference for a service delivery mode was significantly influenced by (a) students’ preference of educational setting \[\chi^2 (1, n = 88) = 7.66, p = 0.005\], and (b) their view of which setting provided more academic benefits \[\chi^2 (1, n = 85) = 3.61, p = 0.047\]. In particular, more students who preferred the resource room setting also preferred the pull-out service delivery mode (64%) than the in-class support model (36%), and more students who reported that they learned better in the resource room preferred to be pulled-out (58.2%) than to have in-class support (41.8%).

Those students who preferred the pull-out rather than the in-class model based their preference on the view that they learn and understand things better and receive much more individualized help in the resource room. A not insignificant number of students (20%) justified their preference for receiving additional help in the resource room by referring to the barriers of learning that were found in the regular education context; typical comments included:

I would rather go to Mr’ … class [resource room] because at Mrs’ … class [regular class] it’s too noisy and I can’t study that easy. (no. 3)

I would rather go to Mrs’ … class [resource room] because at Mrs’ … class [regular class] I can’t catch up with things. (no. 5)

I would rather go to Mrs’ … class [resource room] because at Mrs’ … class [regular class] we do nothing, we just sit. Mrs … [regular teacher] gives handouts to the other kids and gives nothing to us. (no. 8)

In some cases, students speculated that the in-class support model would necessitate more and harder work on their part and, in turn, the loss of fun and easy/less work that takes place at the resource room setting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of receiving help</th>
<th>Type of educational setting:</th>
<th>Setting providing academic benefits:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular class ( n = 38 )</td>
<td>Resource room ( n = 50 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular class ( n = 30 )</td>
<td>Resource room ( n = 55 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull-out</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
<td>7.66</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( p )</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Differences between students’ preferences for location of receiving help (pull-out or in-classroom) on preferences for: (a) type of educational setting, and (b) setting providing academic benefits
I would rather go to Mr’ … class [resource room] because I will miss the difficult stuff. (no. 62)

I would rather go to Mrs’ … class [resource room] because I have better time there. At Mrs’ … class [regular class] it will be a lot of work, but at Mrs’ … class [resource room] we have more fun, more drawings. (no. 20)

On the other hand, the great majority of the students who preferred the in-class support model reported that this model would be beneficial for all students, and they viewed the special education teacher not as providing help to a specific group of pupils, but as a ‘helper’ to the general classroom teacher:

I would like Mrs … [special teacher] to come to my class because our teacher [regular teacher] can’t help all the kids by herself. (no. 27)

I would like Mrs … [special teacher] to come upstairs [regular class], so the two teachers can help each other and they can both help all kids, if they [kids] have problems. (no. 40)

Other students based their preference of the in-class support either on their desire to remain in their classroom with the rest of their peers or on their unwillingness to be pulled out from their class:

I would like Mr … [special teacher] to come to my class so I can stay in my class, not to go to another class [resource room], to leave my classroom. I want to be with the other kids [peers], so I am not all by myself there. I want to be with the other kids, and if we don’t know something, they [both teachers] can help us and we can ask them. (no. 30)

Only two students preferred the in-class support because they enjoyed being with the special education teacher for the whole school day, receiving individualized support on every subject and not only in language and/or maths:

I would like Mrs … [special teacher] to be in my class, because I would spent more time with her in all lessons and I would like that because she is nice and better than Mrs … [regular teacher] and I understand things better with her than with Mrs … [regular teacher]. (no. 59)

**Discussion**

Inevitably, in examining almost 100 interviews, a number of interesting issues worthy of analysis have emerged. However, restrictions on space mean that we have confined our analysis to our original research areas, but return to the other issues in subsequent publications.

The results of the present study clearly confirmed our hypotheses that: (a) students do hold preferences about where and by whom they should be taught, and (b) they do not unanimously prefer one service delivery mode over another (see also: Jenkins & Heinen, 1989; Vaughn & Klingner, 1998; Klingner et al., 1998).

While the majority of the students preferred the resource room over their regular class, it is significant that almost one-third of the participants preferred their regular classroom. This finding was somewhat surprising especially because, currently within the Greek educational system, students with learning difficulties are mostly left alone within the regular classroom, without any kind of provision other than the support
provided by the regular teacher (Vlachou et al., 2003). In many cases, they are expected to manage on their own, within a context that traditionally has been highly academic, characterized by uniformity regarding curricula, materials and teaching methods and with few accommodations being made to meet their social and academic needs (Vlachou et al., 2003).

One interpretation of this might be that the students, who participated in this study, were identified as having only general learning difficulties and, thus, further research is needed in order to include the views and preferences of students with learning disabilities and other impairments who may find it more difficult to respond, without any kind of support, to the demands of the regular setting. However, these findings might also be an indication that the identification and placement procedures need to be seriously reconsidered at least for the students who are characterized as having general learning difficulties.

The analysis of the interview protocols indicated that students’ preference of educational setting (regular or resource room) was significantly influenced by their view of which setting provides more academic benefits. Those who reported that they learned more effectively in the resource room preferred that setting to the regular classroom. Correspondingly, those students who reported that they achieved better outcomes in the regular classroom preferred that location rather than the resource room.

Students who preferred their regular classroom regarded it as their ‘natural learning place’, while one of the principal reasons for choosing the regular classroom was the willingness of the regular teacher to explain things and not to reprimand them when making mistakes. Students who preferred the resource room reported they learned better there, finding the workload less and also easier, and valuing the type and amount of support they received from their special teacher. Moreover, students reported that they had more fun in the resource room rather than in the regular class that was characterized mainly by its hard work. This finding presents a challenge for special educators, in that they have to achieve a delicate balance between retaining the sense of enjoyment that most students derive from attending the resource room with the need to keep the work at such a level that it does not appear too simple to students; a task that could prove problematic given the likely range of needs and abilities that special educators will encounter.

In accordance with previous findings, the most frequently provided reasons by students who preferred the resource room over the regular class related mainly to its structural characteristics (see also Padeliadu, 1995; Klingner et al., 1998; Vaughn & Klingner, 1998). However, in a not insignificant number of cases, children preferred the resource room over the regular classroom because the volume of work was less and easier. As Vaughn and Klingner (1998) maintain, the finding that students like and prefer the resource room because the work is easier and more fun than that provided in the regular classroom has at least two possible interpretations. On the one hand, it may mean that students are receiving work that is appropriate for them making learning possible. On the other hand, it could mean that the work is too easy and not nearly challenging enough, and that, although students may view easy work
positively, it may not make for the most effective education. Given the criticism concerning the role, function and quality of the education provided in resource room settings (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 1983; Gallagher, 1984; Pugach & Lilly, 1984; Haynes & Jenkins, 1986) further research is needed, to enable a further clarification of issues concerning the quality of the learning environment at the resource room to be achieved.

However, despite these complexities, the great majority of students preferred receiving help from the special education teacher. This finding confirms, to some extent, previous research evidence (Padeliadu, 1995), and contradicts Jenkins and Heinen’s (1989) finding that a large majority of students think they would prefer getting help from the regular teacher rather than a specialist. It also contradicts the finding of Baker et al. (1990, cited in Padeliadu, 1995) that most students do not seem to have a very strong preference for the teacher providing help. In fact, according to the findings of this study, students’ preference for receiving help from the special teacher was even stronger than their preference of going to the resource room setting. While a number of methodological differences among these studies could be enumerated as reasons for interpreting the difference in findings (see Padeliadu, 1995), at the same time, the specific characteristics of the different educational systems and the large variations across cross-national programmes that use the ‘same’ service model may be of relevance in explaining such differences. For instance, within the Greek educational system the main, and in some cases, the only, type of support for students characterized as having learning difficulties is provided by the special teacher in the resource room setting (see Vlachou, et al., 2003). Thus, it was not a surprise that the students valued not only the support, but also the person who provided the support.

It was, however, a surprise to establish that almost half of the participants preferred to receive the additional support within their regular class. It is important to remind ourselves that none of the participants had any experience of the in-class support model because it does not exist in the Greek educational system. Further analysis of this finding indicated that the preference for a service delivery mode (pull out or in-class support) was significantly influenced by (a) students’ preference of educational setting (regular or resource room), and (b) their view of which setting provides more academic benefits. Additionally, and consistent with previous findings, the students who preferred the in-class support viewed the special teacher as a ‘helper’ to the regular teacher (Pugach & Wesson, 1995) and reported that assistance should be provided to all students, not just the students with special educational needs (Klingner et al., 1998).

Those students who preferred the pull-out rather than the in-class model based their preference on their view that they learn and understand things better, as well as receiving much more help in the resource room. Simultaneously, a not insignificant number of students in justifying their preference of the pull-out delivery mode, referred to a number of barriers to learning that they were experiencing in the regular education classroom. In particular, the fast pace of teaching, the difficulty of some of the subjects being taught, the assignment of harder work and the lack of modifications, and the
amount of noise in conjunction with the teacher’s inability to provide individualized support to students as a consequence of the larger number of students, were the most frequently identified barriers experienced by the students who preferred to receive additional help in the resource room.

Overall, the almost equal division of students’ responses towards pull-out or in-class support suggests that they prefer a continuum of services to be available. They consider this to be most likely to meet their divergent individual needs than any one particular model, confirming Vaughn and Klingner’s (1998) claim that there is an advantage to providing a range of different service delivery modes. However, the issue that still needs further consideration not only in terms of research, but also in practical and political terms, is the exploration of ways in which students’ perspectives can be better incorporated into decision-making (McCallum et al., 2000) and how their views might improve services in both regular and special education settings.

Concluding comments

Before discussing final inferences, it is important to address some of the limitations of the study. First, the vagueness and confusion surrounding the term ‘learning difficulties’, basically deriving from the lack of systematic individual diagnostic procedures in the Greek educational context, and the broader confusion in the field of learning difficulties, limit the generalizability of the results and make comparisons difficult across studies. Secondly, construct validity issues may arise from the way the interview questions were phrased. For instance, question 3: ‘Which of the two classrooms do you prefer going to?’, might have been interpreted as a question about the effectiveness and quality of the programme or about students’ affinity with the personality of the teacher. In fact, further analysis of the protocols revealed that almost twice as many students interpreted this question as concerning the quality of the programme in comparison to students who accentuated the personality characteristics of the teacher.

However, despite the study’s acknowledged limitations (and although it represents only an initial foray into the situation in Greece), it does appear that we can come to some preliminary conclusions regarding both Greek students’ preferences and how these relate to those expressed by students elsewhere. First, it appears that the views of Greek students are similar to those of other students elsewhere, having divergent views regarding the efficacy or otherwise of various forms of additional educational support. In so far as those questioned had no experience of in-class support, this shared perception does, interestingly, add to the current debate regarding the most appropriate forms of additional support and the need to ensure that where the adopted model is that of in-class support, further research is needed to ensure that any of the associated negative effects are mitigated as far as possible. What, of course, is highlighted is that there can never perhaps be only one approach to the delivery of additional support, rather that a continuum of provision should be available in schools to account for different preferences and styles of learning.
In Greece, however, the prospect of such resource-intensive provision remains somewhat of a chimera, and in fact it will be many years before this becomes available. Secondly, and in many ways most interestingly, we were impressed by the capacity of the students to reflect on their experiences and views on these issues. This highlights again a danger that those working in this field should guard against, namely a tendency to underestimate the potential of all students, including those with special needs, to provide valuable data illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of current forms of provision, and students’ views concerning projected changes and developments. Such a finding is therefore, at one and the same time, a salutary reminder not to underestimate students’ potential and an encouragement to researchers to undertake similar studies to further refine our knowledge and understanding of these issues.

References


