Role of special/support teachers in Greek primary schools: a counterproductive effect of ‘inclusion’ practices

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Pull-out programmes, resource, and/or support rooms and services have played a vital role in either hindering or promoting the implementation of more inclusive practices in school communities. In Greece there is a strong assumption that support rooms and part-time withdrawal are the most effective ways of promoting the educational and social inclusion of children defined as having special needs. It is this assumption that the present analysis intends to challenge through the exploration of the way special teachers of primary education, who work in support rooms, perceive and interpret their role(s) and duties.

Introduction

During the last few decades, an interest in questions of rights, equity and inclusion has been established from different social groups and their organizations, while in different countries there are a number of stated intentions and written policies moving towards the achievement of inclusive education (Pijl et al., 1997; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Hegarty, 1998). Hegarty, in an attempt to provide an international perspective of the current state of special education across Europe, states that ‘school reform is on the agenda in many countries as the importance of education for the individual and the community is better appreciated and historical inequalities in access and educational opportunities are recognized. Increasingly, this general reform is seen to encompass special education’ (p. 113). This developmental, non-linear process has included a number of stages that have influenced the current educational provision for pupils who have been characterized as having special needs.

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In particular, around the 1970s, the programmes spawned by special education were largely specialized and distinct from traditional education in terms of instructional approaches, curriculum content and student placement (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Many of the pupils who qualified for special education were not only isolated from their peers in regular education, but also were performing very poorly academically (SRI, 1991). By the mid-1980s, in response to the inadequate education being provided to disabled and/or children with special needs, many organizations and advocates began to call for integrating the above-mentioned children into the regular classroom under the assumption that this approach would improve student performance (Wang, 1998). In the early 1990s, the focus of special education reformers was ‘inclusion’ which went beyond just admitting disabled and special needs pupils to the regular classroom and called for making these pupils truly a ‘part’ of the regular classroom experience. Currently, the focus of many advocates is a more authentic and school or system-wide inclusion, recognizing (1) the civil rights aspects of inclusion and (2) the essential and interrelated role played by curriculum, instruction and placement (Fulcher, 1989; Armstrong & Barton, 1999; Barton, 2001).

All of the above changes have influenced the expected, perceived, and actual roles and duties of what have been periodically called special-, resource- or supportteachers and have created a continuing debate over the role, aims and effectiveness of their interventions. The current trend promoted by most systems is for a more collaborative approach between the special/support teacher and the regular class teacher. Special teachers are seen not simply as supporting individual pupils, but as taking on a more proactive role in improving the capacity of the mainstream school to overcome barriers to learning and participation (Forlin, 2001). At the same time, however, there is still considerable variation in the special teacher’s role at international, national and local levels, while there are relatively few studies of how this role is developing in different countries (Arnaiz & Castejon, 2001; Crowther et al., 2001; Emanuelsson, 2001; Forlin, 2001). Thus, the aim of this study is to explore the way special/support teachers of primary education in Greece, who work in support rooms, perceive, and interpret their role(s) and duties. The insights derived are part of a much wider exploration of special teachers’ perceptions concerning the aim, role and operation of the support room provision.

The discussion locates special teachers’ role within the wider educational context in an attempt to challenge current dominant assumptions that identify support room
provision with ‘inclusion’ practices. Additionally, the insights offered in an analysis of a particular national case study, while not comparative as such, can contribute, in the more global quest, to the understanding of the nature of the educational enterprises within which efforts are made to promote more inclusive policy practices.

Setting the perspective

In 1985, the 1566 Act on the ‘Structure and Operation of Primary and Secondary Education’ (Greek Government, 1985) was the first Act to promote the idea that special schooling was an integral part of general education and transferred the responsibility of special education solely to the Ministry of Education. Although the 1566 Act promoted the idea of integration, it maintained the ten categories of ‘handicap’ (sic.) and strengthened the medical deficit-approach to special needs (Vlachou-Balafouti, 1999; Zoniou-Sideri, 2000). In addition, the Act promoted the operation of special classes within ordinary schools as a means of promoting the inclusion of children defined as having special needs. In a more recent Act 2817/2000 on the ‘Education of Persons with Special Education Needs’ (Greek Government, 2000), ‘special classes’ were redefined as ‘integration units’. That was mainly a change of terminology without any further organizational or other changes.

At this point, it is important to clarify that special classes function quite differently from what in most countries a special class is perceived to be. The Greek ‘special class’ is much closer to the US resource or pull out programmes, or to what the British describe as part-time withdrawal in a learning support base. For this reason, the term ‘support room/class’ instead of ‘special class’ is being used in this analysis so it would be better understood by the international reader.

However, before embarking on a fuller analysis, some of the major characteristics of the Greek educational system are going to be briefly presented because school conditions are the most decisive for determining special teachers’ roles and duties (Vlachou, 1997). Furthermore, such an analysis provides the context within which the growth of support rooms has taken place and enables us to contextualize the results of the study.

Greek educational system: some observations

The Greek education system has always been extremely centralized and firmly controlled by the state. Educational policy is formulated and enforced by the Ministry
of Education, which exercises a rigid control over school procedures such as staff appointment, curricula creation and distribution of textbooks, time table prescriptions, resource allocation, in-service training, and school organization (Kassiotakis & Lambrakis, 1998). Greek schools are obliged to follow a common school policy, a strict academically oriented national curriculum, the same instructional guidelines, the same textbooks, provided free of charge by the Ministry of Education, and an almost identical time table. What emerges from the above is a very consistent picture regarding school management, resources, curriculum content and teaching arrangements across the country. Although this uniformity partly reflects recent political rhetoric towards strengthening equality and establishing democratization and modernization of education, it also demonstrates the unwillingness of an inflexible and under-resourced system to negotiate educational processes and outcomes and meet the diverse needs of its pupils (Papadopoulos, 1997).

At the same time, however, and within this restrictive and centrally controlled context, individual schools and teachers, if compared with schools of other European countries, are more autonomous in certain areas. In particular, the ultimate authority in the school is the board of teachers with the head teacher being considered as ‘first among equals’. Teachers, since the abolition of the School Inspectorate in 1983, have enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in their classrooms. Efforts to reinstate some measures of teacher appraisal have been fiercely and successfully opposed by their Union. The state holds a very limited role over what has been traditionally perceived as ‘internal school affairs’ such as classroom organization, teacher accountability, pupil testing and assessment of school quality. From this perspective, although there is a strong sense of top to down enforced policy there are a number of occasions that confirm Fulcher’s (1989) model of policy made at different levels. That policy is made at all or at different levels, means that struggles about lets say ‘appropriate educational practices’ are replayed in a range of arenas: what policy is made in a School Council, or in a particular class, cannot be predicted from a knowledge of say national level written policy (for further analysis see, Fulcher, 1989).

For instance, a number of stated and written reforms in mid eighties were introduced in an effort to promote a more child-oriented approach to teaching and learning with an emphasis on issues such as access to participation, active learning, observation, creativity, experimentation and cooperation among pupils (Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, 1987). Recently, new educational reforms
are being introduced in an effort to enrich and extent the curriculum offered. New proposals include the introduction of art, foreign languages, technology information, environmental education, topic work to link subject areas and facilitate more ‘hands on-experience’ learning.

Even though these reforms as well as the new curricula and textbooks have been well received by teachers, still the long established ways of schooling (i.e. academically demanding, subject oriented and teacher controlled curriculum) have not been challenged. The instructional approaches endorsed in textbooks and guidebooks were in fact of a traditional-type with much less scope for cooperative work, individualized or active learning (Flouris, 1995). Subjects are still taught separately, with language and mathematics having the highest priorities. Curricula content descent almost exclusively from the state single-version textbooks while teaching instructions are influenced by the state-delivered teacher manuals.

In addition, the overloaded syllabuses, the resource deficiencies and the reluctance of teachers to adapt new approaches perpetuate the emphasis on a didactic pedagogy where the teacher is in charge, pupils are working alone, and learning is undifferentiated and structured along factual predetermined content (Matsagouras & Riding, 1996). Assessment often emphasizes skills and fragmented knowledge retrieval and is mainly used to stimulate academic performance and inform parents about their children’s achievement as compared with the norm of the ‘average/good’ pupil (Flouris, 1995; Papadopoulos, 1997).

Within the above schooling context, the fact that the vast majority of children with special needs are within ordinary schools does not justify political claims of supporting inclusion. There are many instances where pupils with special needs are required to attend the regular classroom due to lack of any suitable special education facilities. In these cases, children with learning difficulties/disabilities, with very little or no support at all, confront an educational system that is unable to adjust to their differences. From this perspective, the inclusion discourse, instead of focusing on pedagogical practices including the political economy of schooling, organizational issues, staff development and the curriculum, focus on issues of disability. But the political and practical tactic of placing disability rather than the curriculum as the object of concern constitutes the basis of a divisive ideology that maintains exclusion (Vlachou-Balafouti, 1999; Tzouriadou, 2000). As Zoniou-Sideri (2000) indicates, new special schools are being founded while no state initiatives to facilitate inclusion apart from the controversial
Support room model have been developed. It is indicative that after the initial introduction of integration, special schools for disabled children have more than doubled while more than 800+ support rooms for children defined as having special needs have been established (Greek Ministry of National and Religious Affairs, 1994).

**Growth of support room provision**


Support rooms operate within ordinary schools and enrol a small number [between eight and 15] of pupils from other ordinary classes. … Attendance in these classes is generally part-time, depending on each pupil’s learning difficulties. That is, a pupil may attend the special class, e.g. for language instruction, a few hours per day or week, during a short or long period of time … while also attends the ordinary class for the school subjects.

Support rooms can be found only at the primary school level while throughout secondary education no extra help is provided and parents are forced to seek expensive private tuition — a common and very dominant ‘tradition’ even for high achievers — in order to give their children a better chance in tackling the demanding secondary curriculum and examinations (Papadopoulos, 1997).

The target group for support room instruction has vaguely been described in Circular C6/399/1984 as children with ‘learning difficulties’. Students with learning difficulties are considered those whose access to curriculum is limited because of short-term or persistent problems in one or more areas of literacy, numeracy and learning how to learn. According to the Circular, this population does not necessarily include disabled children, the majority of which are either educated at special schools or receive no education at all.

Screening and statement procedures, as well as norm-referenced assessment, are neither required nor practised in Greek schools. In the vast majority of cases, children who are withdrawn do not have any diagnosis while the criteria, which determine support rooms admission, are quite questionable. Enrolment to a support room is largely guided by ordinary teachers’ informal referral judgements; judgements that subsequently tend to be confirmed rather than challenged by support teachers’ assessment (Floratou, 1994; Papadopoulos, 1997).

Even though there is not a clearly defined job description for special teachers, the formally stated expectations and requirements of them seem to be restricted within
the boundaries of the support room environment. The special teacher is employed full-time for the support room, s/he does not have any additional teaching or administrative duties, is accountable to the head teacher and has the same workload and non-teaching duties as any other ordinary teacher.

Concerning the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of the support-room intervention, the literature search failed to locate any hard evidence despite the impressive increase in the number of support classes during the last 20 years of their operation. From early accounts of individual support room teachers, a number of problems and constraints impeding good practice and development have been picked up (Mitrakos, 1985; Christakis, 1989; Floratou, 1994).

However, given the lack of any sincere political commitment to promote inclusive practices in conjunction to the way the ordinary school functions, support rooms are considered as the best way, the most attractive and favoured learning support measure in ordinary schools despite the fact that this model has proven controversial elsewhere (Haynes & Jenkins, 1986; Wang et al., 1986; Fisher et al., 2002). It seems that the usefulness and effectiveness of the support room provision has been regarded as self-evident and this can partly explain the scarcity of critical discussion on the present system and the absence of any debate on its future development within the Greek literature (Markovitis et al., 1985).

**Methods**

**Sample**

Sixty-three school settings, from eight cities located in the broader geographical area of Central Greece participated in the study. The schools were selected because they were all public schools in urban areas and all had support room settings with a qualified special teacher. Thus, the participants of this study consisted of 63 special teachers who, at the time that this study was implemented, were employed in the above-mentioned regular primary schools. The fact that the particular sample is not representative of all Greek geographical areas is a potential limitation of this study. However, the impact of this limitation in terms of representativeness and generalizibility of the results can be decreased given the uniformity of school structures, practices and hiring procedures throughout the country. At the same time, I make no claims for the general application or representativeness of the statements, but I will claim that the following analysis raises some important and specific instances relating to the central concerns of promoting inclusive practices.
The majority of the participants were 62% male and 38% female, while about 89% of the participants fell on the 36–45- and 46–55-year age groups. The age and gender distribution follows the general pattern reported for support room personnel in previous occasions (National Statistical Service (NSS) of Greece, 1991/92, 1993/1993; Papadopoulos, 1997). In particular, as far as the gender distribution is concerned, even though it appears quite unbalanced, compared with the almost 55% gender distribution that exists within the ordinary primary teaching force, follows the general pattern for support room personnel according to which there seems to be more male than female teachers working in a support room context (NSS, 1991/92, 1993/1993). Concerning the age distribution, the significant under-representation of the ‘up to 30’ age group was expected even though it is in contrast to the age distribution among all ordinary primary teachers (NSS, 1991/92, 1993/1993). This can be explained considering that younger staff usually do not have enough qualifications or are considered inexperienced to be appointed at a support room post.

The vast majority of the participants (94%) had been initially trained in primary education at a Pedagogical Academy over 2 years and of these 37% had further pursued a teacher certificate at university level. Sixty-five per cent of those teachers had formal special needs qualifications by attending a 2-year Further Education Training Programme for becoming special teachers. An additional 10% of teachers said that they had received further specialist skills through non-degree bearing in-service training, workshops, seminars or conferences. All special teachers had ordinary school experience with the large majority of them (80%) having worked as a class-teacher for at least 5 years. Participants teaching experience in a regular class context is in congruence with the findings of a previous study, which involved a nationwide representative sample of support room personnel (Papadopoulos, 1997).

Finally, the vast majority of special teachers (83%) had been in a support room from 1 to 14 years while relatively few teachers had more than 15 years of teaching experience in a support room setting.

**Method and analysis**

A combination of a questionnaire and interview procedures was used for the collection of data for this study. The questionnaire included three sets of questions: (1) demographic and professional characteristics of support room personnel, (2) background information of the support room and the support room intake, and (3) background
information of the organizational and administrative features of the support room provision. Respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaire just before the initiation of the interview process.

The semi-structured interviews sought to explore the perceptions of teachers in relation to roles, duties, main features of support rooms and service quality issues. More specifically, the focus of the discussion was divided in three parts:

- The first part included questions about special teachers’ perceptions of their role and duties as support teachers in a mainstream school context.
- The second part concerned questions about special teachers’ perceptions of the aims, role and main features of the organization and operation of support rooms.
- The third part included questions about special teachers’ suggestions of improving the quality of education provided to pupils defined as having special needs.

Each interview lasted approximately 3 hours and it was conducted in a place, which was convenient to the participant. All interviews were audiotaped for accuracy and transcribed verbatim.

For the purposes of this particular paper, I have chosen to focus mainly on these insights that were connected to the way special teachers, who worked in support rooms, perceived and interpreted their role and duties.

The questionnaire data were analysed by calculating frequencies and percentages while in terms of the interviews, the analysis was based on the inductive (data-driven) approach (Borg & Gall, 1989; Boyatzis, 1998). Even though this is a complicated approach (if compared with other approaches i.e. theory driven approach) at the same time the strength of the data-driven approach is that it uses, as much as possible, the way in which the themes appear in the raw information as the starting point in code development (Boyatzis, 1998). Thus, transcribed interviews were read and summary memos were written in order to reduce the raw information. Approximately, 10% of the interviews and memos were then read and re-read and assigned first-level thematic codes based on a qualitative thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Each thematic code had at least four elements: (1) the characteristics or issue constituting the theme, (2) indicators on how to ‘flag’ the theme, (3) a description of any qualifications or exclusions to the identification of the theme, and (4) a clear and concise label, communicating the essence of the theme in the fewest words possible. Then, a further 10% of the interviews and memos were read in order to determine the presence or absence of each of the preliminary thematic codes. Throughout this complex
and untidy process there was also (1) an exhaustive search for unique data, (2) a search for additional thematic codes, (3) a need for revision and/or reconstruction of some of the preliminary thematic codes, and (4) statements of exclusions in the form of ‘rules’ for applying the thematic code to raw material. At this stage interrater reliability testing was performed by another researcher to enhance credibility of coding. More than 80% agreement was found between the two researchers following percentage agreement scores. The revised set of thematic codes was then applied to the remaining sample of the raw information as a test of its ‘validation’.

**Results**

The analysis concerning the role and duties of special teachers within a primary school context revealed a number of key responsibilities. These can be loosely grouped into three major areas: (1) assessing and identifying the needs of pupils, (2) organization and scheduling and (3) teaching and evaluation of support room students. The role and duties of the special teachers as identified in this research are further analysed under these headings.

At this point, it is important to note that despite stated policies, collaboration with ordinary staff did not occur as one of their main responsibilities. This can be partly explained considering that (1) their work was concentrated on autonomous withdrawal intervention with individual children rather than contributions to regular class practice, thus demanding a restricted level of liaison; and (2) support room teachers were not officially authorized to devote time from their normal workload to duties such as planning, lesson preparation, recording of progress, and liaison with ordinary staff and other specialists. However, because the issue of collaboration emerged at almost all the interviews as one of the most complicated parameters of their job, it is going to be further analysed because it affected their role as well as their working conditions.

All the special teachers who participated in this study relied mostly on ordinary staff to identify the pupils who were to be referred for support room provision. In almost 62% of the cases, the ordinary teachers had the sole responsibility for the identification of these pupils who were perceived by them as having learning and/or behavioural difficulties. In 27% of the cases, identification and referral resulted from a collaboration between the ordinary and special teachers, while in very few circumstances (10%) some children entered the school with a diagnosis from an external medico-pedagogical or other diagnostic centre. In a number of cases, special teachers advised parents to contact a diagnostic centre to obtain an official diagnosis, but from the 759 children
who attended the 63 support rooms included in this study, only 196 had a diagnosis. According to special teachers, this happened due to (1) the shortage of advisory and diagnostic centres and (2) parent refusal. Since there were not any official statement procedures, the initial assessment for identifying the particular needs of the referred pupils was perceived as one of the major responsibilities of the support teacher. In all cases, special teachers delivered what they called a ‘learning/educational assessment’ to the children who were identified and referred by the ordinary teachers. This type of assessment was based on criterion-referenced measures such as: (1) basic skills checklists improvised by special teachers themselves (30%) or provided to special teachers in training seminars/courses (10%) or by the special advisors (13%), and (2) more simple evaluations such as verbal and ‘pen-and-paper’ testing of basic skills (22%), as well as a combination of checklists (16%). In addition, 14% of special teachers supplemented their initial assessment with observations in the ordinary setting. In many instances, once a child was referred for withdrawal, s/he attend the support room even when special teachers believed the child was not qualified for withdrawal. According to special teachers, that happened due to micro-political reasons, such as avoiding conflicts with their ordinary colleagues, obtaining the officially required number of pupils for the functioning of support room provision, fears of being ‘accused’ by ordinary staff as not willing to work, etc.

The number of pupils attending support room provision varied considerably between schools. The vast majority of special teachers (59%) reported they had between eight and ten children in their support classrooms, while 36% had between 11 and 20 children, and only a few special teachers (5%) reported having more than 20 pupils. Sixty per cent of the pupils who attended the support rooms included in this study were boys. Pupils were defined as having learning difficulties (52%), behavioural and emotional difficulties (14%), physical impairments (1%), hearing impairments (1%), intellectual impairments (14%), autistic spectrum disorder (1%), speech and language impairments (2%), multiple difficulties (2%), with Greek as a second language (11%), and gypsies (2%).

All but five special teachers emphasized the role of innate attributes, heredity, immaturity or home family circumstances rather than school or teacher deficiencies in explaining their pupils’ learning difficulties:

Some of these children [who attend the support room] due to their inability or mental difficulties
can’t adjust … err … they can’t respond to the demands of the ordinary classroom.
(Interview no. 31, author’s translation)

Usually, and especially the younger children are immature. You can notice that even from their drawings ….
(Interview no. 44, author’s translation)

Most of the children [who attend the support room] come from low socio-economic backgrounds. In the vast majority of cases their parents are uneducated, some of them [parents] have not even finished elementary education. In some cases the only letters that these children have seen at home are the television letters.
(Interview no. 48, author’s translation)

From the extensive interview responses, it emerged that the vast majority of support room children were described by special teachers as underachievers, negatively inclined towards both the school and the teacher, daunted, introverted children with low self-esteem, lacking in incentives and stimuli for learning as well as social skills:
Most of the children [who attend the support room] are mainly frustrated, disheartened. They have experienced a great deal of failure, they have low self-esteem, they don’t believe that if they will try they can succeed in something.’
(Interview no. 2, author’s translation)

According to the special teachers, a respectful number of the referred pupils had experienced indifference, negligence, rejection or even various kinds of abuse from their families:
As a teacher I take seriously into consideration that some children [at the support room] have been neglected from their own parents. For instance, this year I have a child, a girl with emotional difficulties. Her family has a lot of problems: her mum is a drug-addict, her father does not exist — he is in prison and when he gets out he is quite violent. The child grows up with her grand-mum who is ill and cannot support her.
(Interview no. 29, author’s translation)

Organization and scheduling were reported as two important duties that comprised special teachers’ perceived work profile. In particular, as far as the organization of support room provision was concerned, pupils were placed by special teachers in small groups for instruction purposes. The criteria used for grouping children varied between different special teachers. Age (6%), grade (17%), level of achievement (59%), type of special needs (44%), type of learning difficulties (79%) and interpersonal relationships among referred pupils (2%) were the main criteria used for placing
pupils into particular groups. Approximately 62% of special teachers claimed they used more than one of the above-mentioned criteria for grouping pupils, while 38% used only one criterion. However, the analysis of the more extensive responses offered in the interviews indicated that the vast majority of special teachers tried to form groups of similar levels and needs:

Interviewer: Can we talk a bit further about the identification and referral procedure?
ST: Usually the [ordinary] teacher informs me that for example he has two or three pupils who either cannot follow the curriculum or they have a number of difficulties in language and math or even they have behavioural problems. If the teacher is flexible, I am going into his class for a couple of days and I observe the children in their classroom environment in order to see their reactions — if they can or can’t follow the program, their behaviour and so on. After the observations, I withdraw each child to the support room and I administer a combination of verbal and ‘pen and paper’ basic skills checklists and according to their needs I place them in an appropriate group. However, placements procedures are taking place only after obtaining parents’ consent ….

(Interview no. 25, author’s translation, original emphasis)

Preparing the support-room timetable was generally the responsibility of special teachers. In only a few cases (18%) were ordinary staff and/or special advisors involved in the process. The vast majority of special teachers (95%) reported that preparing the support room timetable was a very complex and time-consuming task since they were involved in a difficult decision-making process. In fact, they had to formulate a schedule that (1) was suitable and convenient to all children, (2) was responding to the requirements of grouping for support room instruction, (3) was not in conflict with the inflexible ordinary timetable, (4) was not in conflict with ordinary staff arrangements and (5) was securing the fact that children were not going to miss important and/or favoured subjects. However, very often the creation of the support room timetable was, as a special teacher put it, ‘the end product of multiple compromises’.

Teaching and evaluation of pupils
All the participants claimed that most of their time was devoted to teaching pupils directly. Actually teaching individual pupils seemed to be their exclusive preoccupation even though a respectful number of teachers emphasized the social rather than
the instructional dimension of teaching. In particular, withdrawing pupils on a part-time basis from the regular class to teach them either individually or in small groups was almost the only type of teaching programme used by special teachers. A relatively small number of teachers (12%) reported that sometimes during the school year and for some pupils they used a combination of withdrawal and in-class support. Even though a number of special teachers (33%) believed that in-class support could be a much better way for promoting inclusion at the same time they enumerated a number of reasons and complicated issues that hindered such an approach. The most prevailing reasons, according to special teachers were: (1) limited cooperation between ordinary and special teachers, (2) personality conflicts, (3) negative attitudes, indifference, lack of knowledge, awareness and flexibility of ordinary staff, (4) increasing workload for special teachers, (5) difficulties connected with pupil’s concentration and on-task behaviour, (6) difficulties connected with the inflexible subject-oriented national curriculum, and (7) a strong perception that inclass support will be threatening for both ordinary and special teachers. Four of 63 special teachers argued that promoting inclusion demands a serious political commitment, a strong theoretical and organizational framework, as well as redefining the aims and objectives of education and restructuring the way schools operate. Those special teachers who were against in-class support also expressed some of the above reasons. It was also evident from the extensive interview responses that a respectful number of special teachers perceived that in-class support involved them teaching the pupils who were defined as having special needs and the ordinary teachers as being responsible for the rest of the classroom. The following quotation is indicative:

I am not sure how the in-classroom support model can be implemented. First of all we are talking about co-existence and not about collaboration with the ordinary teacher. He [ordinary teacher] has his own children [ordinary pupils], his own job to do, his own responsibilities, his subjects and I have my job — I have to support my child [pupil with special needs] to concentrate on his task, that means that I will do totally different things from those of the ordinary teacher. … This [in-classroom support] is going to be very confusing for the child as well because when I will be in the [ordinary] class my child [pupil with special needs] will have to attend me and the [ordinary] teacher simultaneously. It is going to be difficult for the child to concentrate and it is also going to be very difficult for me to teach this child while the [ordinary] teacher is simultaneously teaching his children
As far as the instructional approaches were concerned, the vast majority of special teachers referred to a combination of direct instruction and individualized objective teaching with a particular emphasis on controlled seatwork as well as teacher-controlled mastery of basic skills in small sequential steps. There were also many references (78%) to the use of visual, multisensory, concrete materials and worksheets improvised by special teachers. According to their responses, most of the instruction they provided was not directly connected with what was being taught in pupils’ general education classrooms while a respectful number of special teachers used material drawn from junior grades especially when they were teaching older pupils.

Improvising individualized educational programmes was their responsibility, while a respectful number of special teachers, as the following quotation indicates, felt that they have been ‘left alone’ in their effort to respond to the complexities of their work since they did not have any formal, systematic support, information and guidance that will help them to create more effective and appropriate teaching interventions:

I dive into deep waters and I extemporize based only on my experience and my intuition. Often this makes me feel very insecure.

(Interview no. 57, author’s translation)

According to all the special teachers involved in this study, the ultimate aim of their intervention was to support children to master the necessary skills and knowledge base so as to follow and keep with the curriculum that was being presented in their ordinary class. At the same time, however, about 40% of special teachers claimed their role was much more complex than teaching basic skills to children with learning difficulties. They viewed their role as multidimensional in the sense that they were first concerned with the emotional, psychological and social well-being of the children and then with teaching practices:

After working fifteen years in support rooms I have been convinced that teaching is just a part of what I have to do. I strongly believe that other things are very important — even more important — than teaching lets say math. Most of the children [at the support room] need psychological and emotional support, they want to communicate, in fact they want to learn how to communicate, they need to learn communicative and other skills that they
didn’t have the chance to learn at home. … They want to feel secure so as to talk about other things, that they didn’t dare to talk or they didn’t have the opportunity to talk about either in their [ordinary] class or at home. They need to express themselves, their worries, what bothers them, their likes and dislikes. They need to feel respected and that’s not easy because some of them have been rejected from both their family and their school ….

(Interview no. 42, author’s translation)

In fact, 87% of special teachers referred to the supportive environment fostered in their support room as a further distinct feature of their intervention, while all but five special teachers argued that the pupils were much more communicative and responsive in the support rather than the ordinary classroom.

In terms of monitoring and evaluating pupil’s progress, the responses indicated a variety of combined practices such as teacher-made tests (14%), checklists of skills (8%), day-to-day informal assessment (22%), curriculum-based short-term objectives assessment (27%), worksheets (3%), revision tests (3%), observation (3%), feedback from class teachers (8%), or a combination of the above-mentioned practices (17%). Record-keeping was kept to the minimum basically as an act of complicity to relevant mandatory regulations due to time constraints or to a belief that such a practice is a waste of time, too bureaucratic and/or a destruction from actual teaching.

In the vast majority of cases, special teachers reported that grade-evaluation of support room pupils was the responsibility of ordinary teachers. However, some special teachers believed that ordinary teachers evaluated referred pupils’ progress in comparison with the academic standards and demands of the ordinary curriculum. Thus, according to respondents’ perceptions, ordinary teachers focused on the end product rather than the process of learning, belittling in this way the effort and progress that referred children had accomplished during the school year. Special teachers considered this practice as problematic and unfair to referred pupils who, as a special teacher put it, ‘seemed to be always behind their classmates regardless of their individual effort, progress and success’.

Collaboration with ordinary staff

The participants did not consider collaboration with ordinary staff as a distinct responsibility of their perceived work profile. In particular, 24% of special teachers indicated that they did not have any type of collaboration with their ordinary colleagues, while 62% reported that there was some kind of collaboration and that they had good and supportive relationships with individual teachers. However, a
further exploration of what ‘good’ and ‘supportive’ relationships meant indicated that
either both types of teachers did not intervene into each others’ work or collaboration
was restricted in informal scattered discussions about particular pupils or about
curriculum content as a response to general questions such as ‘what are you teaching
this week?’

Collaboration in terms of co-planning, co-teaching or co-evaluating was a low
priority area and in the vast majority of cases did not exist as a practice. In addition
to the lack of a specific official policy and time allocation for this responsibility, special
teachers’ interview responses revealed a number of other reasons that inhibited their
ability to establish meaningful working relationships with regular teachers such as the
following:
- Inflexible schooling structures and practices.
- Reluctance or resistance to alter established working practices.
- Different approaches to the teaching and learning processes between special and
  regular education teachers.
- Different ways of approaching ‘support room’ pupils.
- Strong assumption that the support teacher held full responsibility for the referred
  pupils, hence collaboration and formal curriculum adaptations for the benefit of
  support-room children were not perceived as being within the realm of the classroom
  teachers’ responsibilities.
- Special teachers’ perception that general educators are not familiar with special
  education and thus either do not have the instructional skills to meet the academic
  needs of referred pupils or cannot adapt the general education curricula.
- Special teachers’ belief that some of the regular teachers were positive towards the
  importance of special teachers and support rooms because they were relieved from
  the difficulties of instructing and managing ‘hard-to-teach’ students by having
  them withdrawn for intervention.

Additionally, a respectful number of special teachers felt their work was often
misunderstood and even devalued by some staff members of the school. Thus, they
had to prove their abilities and worth constantly to particular individual teachers.
According to almost all the special teachers who participated in this study, it
would have been much easier to (im)prove their skills and abilities as well as to
strengthen the effectiveness of their intervention if other related agencies and/or
specialists had supported them. From their responses, it was evident that the need
for specialist support was far greater than the offer. In particular, 38% of the teachers claimed they had some kind of support from the special advisors, while 11% said that other specialists such as psychologists and social workers had supported them periodically. However, the vast majority of the teachers felt strongly that they themselves, the pupils and the pupils’ parents had not received any substantial support. This strengthened their feelings of being professionally isolated and unsupported.

According to their responses, the most frequently requested services were that of psychological support services (68%), social work/pastoral care (52%), and advisory teams (in-service training) in terms of planning and monitoring individualized educational programmes (41%). Note that special teachers’ reference to psychological agencies focused more on being supported by psychologists to understand pupils’ difficulties and create more effective approaches rather than on issues of diagnosis. In fact, a respectful number of special teachers were sceptical, hesitant and/or even suspicious of the role, aims and effectiveness of the scarce diagnostic centres, especially the private ones. They believed that referring pupils to such centres would strengthen the process of stigmatization even though the existence of a diagnosis or a statement procedure could eliminate the amount of conflict involved in the referral process:

Personally, I believe that we must be very cautious with the whole process of diagnosis especially when there is a diagnosis from a private diagnostic center. … Referral to diagnostic centres should not be the first action, because the children are being labeled and lets be honest: such labels follow the child throughout his life.

(Interview no. 60, author’s translation)

**Discussion and conclusion**

As mentioned above, in Greece there is a strong assumption that support rooms and part-time withdrawal are the most effective ways for promoting the educational and social inclusion of children defined as having special needs. It was this assumption that the present analysis intended to challenge through the exploration of the way 63 special teachers of primary education, who worked in support rooms, perceived and interpreted their role(s) and duties.

Even though there was not any formal/official school code in operation that determined how support provision was understood and how it was practised, according to the findings of the study special teachers were responsible for assessing, monitoring and teaching pupils defined as having special needs as well as for organizing the
support room provision. These findings are in congruence with the results of a previous study that had as an ultimate aim to examine the support room provision in Greek primary schools (Papadopoulos, 1997). Within these categories there was a definite weighting towards working directly with individual pupils while withdrawing and teaching individual or small groups of children seemed to be the most important educational responsibility to which they were held directly or indirectly accountable. Even though the issue of collaboration with other staff was not reported as being one of their major responsibilities, it was analysed because it appeared in almost all the interviews as affecting both their role and the effectiveness of their intervention.

The findings indicate that special teachers participated in a system that divides and separates teachers in the same way that it isolates and categorizes students. Such a system is based on a division of roles, priorities and a clarification of who is responsible for whom (regular teachers for regular children and special teachers for special needs children) while it fosters individualistic efforts such as teachers instructing alone behind closed doors, special teachers conducting one-on-one sessions in separate rooms, and individualized educational programmes organized to require separate objectives (Floratou, 1994). In the vast majority of the cases, even assessing the needs of pupils was the special teachers’ responsibility that had been left alone to deal with such a complex task and make decisions based on quite questionable criteria. These practices contravene the stated and written national policies of promoting more inclusive school communities. It is a work pattern that is reminiscent of the earlier model of special education service delivery, which emphasized direct teaching by a ‘special teacher’. This contradiction is partly the result of the fact that although the Education Acts of 1985 and 2000 approached special education as part of ordinary education — a very significant step — they both failed to change the basic characteristics of the general system, which is often extremely exclusive — both in its structure and nature — not only for the so-called children with special needs, but also for a number of other pupils (Flouris, 1995; Vlachou-Balafouti, 1999; Tzouriadou, 2000; Zoniou-Sideri, 2000).

Given that educational structures have not been changed in the direction of promoting more inclusive practices, the reactive role of the special teachers was restricted within the boundaries of their support rooms while the source of pupil’s difficulties was seen to reside in their ‘defects’ rather than the defects and limitations of schooling. However, the political practice of masking the role of schooling in
creating or in strengthening the problem serves to obscure productive solutions to enduring and persistent problems, and while the option of withdrawing some pupils remains, the fundamental structure of education will remain intact without challenging traditional approaches to curriculum, instruction, and the existing culture and economy of schooling (Barton, 2001). As Fragou (1989) maintains, the history of children with special needs in Greece does not indicate their inability to adjust to the educational system. It rather indicates the rigidity of the educational system and its inability to adjust to their differences.

As the findings revealed, almost all special teachers emphasized the role of innate attributes, heredity, immaturity or home family circumstances rather than school or teacher deficiencies in explaining their pupils’ learning difficulties. However, a more careful and critical approach of the findings indicates that a respectful number of the so-called learning disabled population, who were partially excluded from their regular classes, had nothing to do with impairments. For instance, as mentioned in the analysis, only 7% of the support room pupils’ special needs was connected with some kind of impairment while 14% was defined as having intellectual impairments. It is a quite complicated and contested label in terms of its multiple, environmental or unknown causes (Papaioannou, 1984). The remaining children were mainly characterized as having ‘learning and/or behavioural difficulties’.

The social dimension of special needs was one of the reasons that the teachers who participated in this study perceived their role as ‘much more complex than teaching basic skills to children with learning difficulties’. They emphasized more the social rather than the instructional/academic dimension of their role while they referred to the supportive environment fostered in their support room as a distinct feature of their intervention. In addition, they indicated that they could be much more supportive, proactive and effective if they themselves were supported in their attempt to understand and meet the complex demands of the pupils.

The absence of supporting networks of collaboration, of information and of advisory intervention restricted even further the impact of their role, while it created feelings of insecurity and professional isolation. Such feelings have also been expressed in earlier accounts of individual support room teachers who were quite critical about how support room provision was initiated by the central authorities and questioned whether there was a sincere commitment to promote more inclusive practices and make support room provision to work (Christakis, 1989; Floratou, 1994). However, in a
context where teachers feel insecure, lack encouragement and are provided with little serious, sustained and adequately resourced staff development, calls to promote more inclusive educational priorities will be viewed as laudable rhetoric on the level of stated policy and ‘impractical’ on the level of enacted policy (Vlachou, 1997).

Finally, the insights of this study revealed that as far as the collaborative aspect of their role was concerned, it remained at a functional level, strengthening and/or being strengthened by a divisive ideology that implies that children with special needs belong to a different pedagogical category and thus cannot be taught by ordinary teachers.

The issue of collaboration between special and regular teachers is of a significant value, since successful inclusion is unlikely to occur unless general and special education professionals share possessions of the skills necessary to meet adequately the diversity of needs and strengths presented by the children (Klinger & Vaughn, 2002).

In fact, collaboration (both its content and quality) has been reported as being one of the most important and at the same time of the most complicated parameters for promoting inclusive education (Wood, 1998; Imants et al., 2001; Klinger & Vaughn, 2002).

The power of collaborative teams lies in their capacity to merge unique skills of talented educators, to foster feelings of positive interdependence, to develop creative problem-solving skills and to hold one another personally accountable for educational responsibilities (Thousand & Villa, 1990). But adopting a collaborative mode of interaction requires teachers to reach new understandings about their work, its purpose, how to accomplish it and how their work connects with other (Fullan, 1991). It also demands a change in existing organizational structures, job roles and responsibilities. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine how collaboration between special and regular teachers can be accomplished within an education system that does the following:

- Does not officially allow time for planning, lesson preparation, the recording of progress and liaison with ordinary staff.
- Does not promote any official in classroom support provision.
- Perpetuates school practices as well as pre- and in-service training practices on a strict division of regular and special teachers’ roles, responsibilities and skills.

Within this context, we need to re-examine seriously both the role of special/support teachers and the dominant ‘common-sense’ assumption that support room and parttime withdrawal are the most effective way in terms of promoting more inclusive
practices and ideologies. Such an examination should take place within a process of understanding how special teachers can be supported in adopting a role that stresses the review and development of the processes of teaching and learning rather than support for individual pupils. This involves using the ‘resources’ of special education in a direct way to develop pedagogy rather than to spread them ever more thinly across increasing numbers of pupils experiencing difficulties (Crowther et al., 2001).

Of outmost importance, though, is that the development of such a role should be understood as a challenge that is not only for special/support teachers (Emanuelsson, 2001). Instead, it must be taken as a challenge for everybody responsible for regular education development in local schools, as well as at a political and administrative level of school systems.

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