

**MEASURING QUALITY AND EQUITY IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION UNITS:
AN ACTION RESEARCH**

**Eleni Damianidou & Helen Phtiaka
(University of Cyprus)**

**Kyriaki Antreou, Irene Kasapi & Sofia Georgiou
(Latsia Lyceum)**

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Literature Review

- Inclusive education is about equal opportunities in education for all children, regardless of ability → trend towards enrollment of disabled children in mainstream schools, underpinned by international conventions (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) → aim towards equal access to quality education

(European Commission, 2010; United Nations, 2006)

- Cyprus:

- Most disabled children are entitled to enroll in mainstream schools (law 113(I)/1999)
- Children labeled as children with severe disabilities are segregated → special schools or special units → fragmented curriculum → emphasis on socialization rather than learning

(Cyprus Parliament, 1999; MoEC, 2016)



- Segregation, coupled with a curriculum that does not aim to enable disabled children maximize their potential, seem to violate the children's right to receive quality education alongside their peers. Moreover, when children are educated separately, they are less likely to develop partnerships and friendships

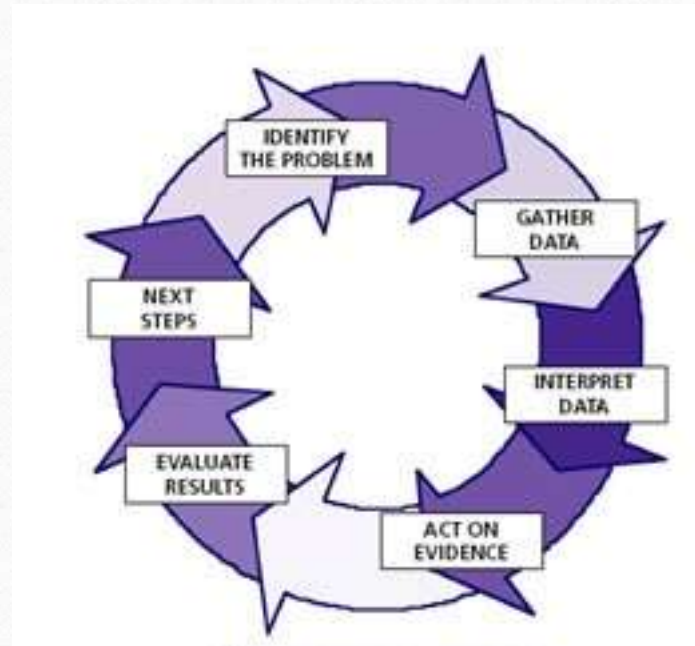
(Barton & Slee, 1999; Richards & Armstrong, 2011)

Context


- Academic year 2016-17
- A special unit was installed at our school
- Five disabled boys aged 16-19 were enrolled at the particular special unit, each one with a different disabling condition
- Disabled children in Cyprus special units attend a special educational program that is decided by the school head-teacher and the special education committee.
- Certificate of attendance which is not equal to a high-school degree → graduates from a special unit are not allowed to continue with tertiary education.
- Fundamental lessons such as Language, Mathematics, Music and Art three times a week
- Twice a week to work places → work experience.
- Entitled to attend lessons in mainstream classes without being graded, given that the teacher agrees

(Cyprus Parliament, 1999; MoEC, 2016).

Research Process: Action Research



1. Identifying the problem

- Being happy at school is a right of every child
 - Children are entitled to receive quality education, regardless of diversity
 - Disabled children in the special unit of our school:
 - Did not seem happy
 - Some of them developed anger bursts and expressed a strong desire to leave the special unit
 - Have the right to quality education
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- We felt that we had to do something about it

Research Questions

- Which factors are related to the decreased well-being of the children in the special unit?
- What changes and improvements can be done so as to create an inclusive setting and improve the children's well-being, as a matter of equal opportunities in quality education?



2. Gathering Data

- Research frame:
 - Social model of disability: disability is socially constructed (Oliver, 1990)
 - Interpretivist paradigm: reality is constructed intersubjectively (Bryman, 2008)
- Research team:
 - A school teacher
 - A university teacher
 - Seven students of the Sociology class
- Research tools:
 - Observation of the children of the special unit during lessons and breaks
 - Semi-structured interviews with the head-teacher, one assistant head-teacher and the students' board
 - Semi-structured questionnaire for teachers of the special units and the school caregivers that looked after the children of the special unit at school
 - Structured questionnaire for the students of our school

(Bryman, 2008)

The researchers in action!



3. Interpreting Data

- Observation:
 - Marginalized and isolated children
 - Hesitated to approach non-disabled students
 - Did not seem interested in learning
- Semi-structured interviews with the head-teacher and one assistant head-teacher :
 - Intention to help as a matter of social justice
 - Efforts to support learning and equity
- Semi-structured interviews with the students' board:
 - Prevalence of the medical model of disability
 - Intention but no action
 - Stereotypes

- Semi-structured questionnaire for teachers and the school caregivers :
 - Prevalence of the medical model of disability
 - Needed more training and support
 - Confusion regarding how to approach the children
 - Happy when the children improve
 - Positive relationships with the children
- Structured questionnaire for students:
 - Prevalence of the medical model of disability
 - Intention but no action
 - Confusion regarding the purpose and function of the special unit
 - Stereotypes

STATEMENT	YES %	NO%	DK/DA %
The special unit is a regular class in our school.	72,8	20,7	6,5
The students of the special unit take a high-school degree.	32,5	14,1	54,3
The students of the special unit are allowed to enroll at the University if they want.	47,8	7,6	44,6
When I see the children of the special units I' m thinking: "Let's go and hang out with them!"	51,1	33,7	15,2
When I have free time I go to grab a coffee with the children of the special unit.	5,4	85,9	8,7
I hang out with children of the special unit when I am at school.	23,9	68,5	7,6
I talk with the children of the special unit when I am at school	33,7	62	4,3
When I have free time I would like to go to grab a coffee with the children of the special unit.	51,1	15,2	33,7
I would like to hang out with children of the special unit when I am at school.	65,2	12	22,8
I would like to talk with the children of the special unit when I am at school	73,9	12	14,1
I believe that the children of the special unit should enroll in mainstream schools.	56,5	25	18,5
I always give charity for children with special needs.	82,6	12	5,4

4. Act on Evidence

- Peer tutoring at the special unit
- Learning together in mainstream classes
- Mingling during breaks
- Playing games
- Communication: facebook, mobile phone
- Organizing and encouraging participation of the children at school events



INTERVENTIONS




5. Evaluate Results

- Hanging out with the students of the special unit and having lessons together resulted in:
 - Better understanding of the children
 - Improvement of learning
 - Development of friendships
 - Promotion of acceptance and equity among school students
 - Dismantling stereotypes
 - Combating racism
- However:
 - Interventions should be carefully planned → surprising and negative reactions are always likely
 - Children should be given enough time to feel familiar with their non-disabled peers and schooling


6. Next Steps

- Organizing seminars and workshops about disability for:
 - Students
 - Parents
 - Teachers
- Dissemination of our results:
 - School webpage
 - Participation in conferences
- Second phase of our action research

Conclusion I: Factors related to decreased well-being of the children

- In general, the children of the special unit are welcomed by the school and the non-disabled students → However, most of the students who participated in the research are neither aware of the actual function and the purpose of the special unit nor aware of the children's needs.
 - Even though there is intention to support the students of the special unit and spend time with them, intention does not imply action.
 - Although racism was not observed, some stereotypes about disability seem to be prevalent, based mainly on the medical model of disability.
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- Marginalization and isolation of the children

Conclusion II: Essential changes and improvements

- Timely and well-planned interventions, based on learning and acting together with their peers, may have positive results on the children's well-being and prompt inclusion.
 - Disabled children need to be treated with respect.
 - People need to see the person – not the disability.
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- Need to:
 - Design and implement further interventions so as to include disabled children.
 - Inform students, parents and teachers about disability.

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Thank you!

Eleni Damianidou

damianidou.eleni@ucy.ac.cy

