EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION:
THE ROLE OF THE CURRICULUM

Eleni Damianidou & Helen Phtiaka
University of Cyprus
Inclusive education: a contentious area of public and education policy → it is essential to de- and re-construct the educational system, so as to provide equal educational opportunities to children, irrespective of diversity

Technical solutions are less than enough in order to solve the problem of how to achieve educational equity

Exclusion may be experienced even within ‘inclusive’ schools, through the curriculum, the assessment and the teachers’ attitudes and practices

(Armstrong, 2005; Barton & Armstrong, 2001)
Having a curriculum provides several benefits:
- an accessible framework for an educational course
- an end goal that teachers set for their students to reach

Curricula may have negative implications: imposed restrictions on teachers

Inclusive teaching:
- differentiating instruction
- adjusting the classroom environment
- respond to the disabled children’s needs

Hence, restrictive and monolithic curricula may raise barriers to inclusion

Teachers become accomplices in this process of exclusion by remaining pathetic performers that always abide by the curriculum

(Erevelles, 2005; Terwell, 2005)
Rationale

- Cyprus teachers:
  - think on the basis of a medical and charity model
  - favour special schooling for specific groups of children
    → marginalization and exclusion
    (Angelides, Stylianou & Gibbs, 2006; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009)

- Objective: to understand the effects of the Cyprus curriculum on everyday teaching practice and the consequent implications regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities
Research questions

- To what extent are equal opportunities in education confirmed by the official curriculum in Cyprus?
- To what extent do teachers abide by the given curriculum and what are the implications on inclusion?
A challenging global context: Globalization, neoliberalism, pluralism, rapid development of information systems and technology, multiculturalism, international financial crisis

The Cyprus education system:
- Primary school – Lower Secondary school (Gymnasium) – Higher Secondary school (Lyceum) / Technical school / Second Chance school
- Teachers:
  - Appointed according to their rank in a list
  - Permanent position
  - Evaluated by the Inspector → Promoted according to his/her evaluation and their years of service

(Educational Service Commission, 2015)
Methodology

- **Mixed method research: two-phase model** (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)
  - Survey → structured questionnaire
  - Semi-structured interviews

- **Population**: 6169 secondary education teachers in Cyprus

- **Sample**:
  - Survey: 536 secondary education teachers
    - Stratified random sampling method
    - Response rate: 89%
  - Interviews: 21 secondary education teachers
    - Purposive and snowball sampling

- **Data analysis** (Robson, 2002):
  - Quantitative data: SPSS → descriptive and inferential statistics
  - Qualitative data: thematic and critical analysis
## Demographics: Survey (1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyceum</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical School</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Chance School</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA/MSc</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the participants had experiences with disabled children in their school (67.4%), their class (71.1%), a support class (50.2%) or a special unit in the mainstream school (66.2%).

Almost half of the participants did not have any training on how to teach disabled students (47.4%), even though most of them had disabled children in their class.

Most of the participants would like to have more training on disability issues (82.3%).
# Demographics: Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years in service</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years in service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Head-teachers (H.T.)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marios</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Tryfonas</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deputy Head-teachers (D.H.T.)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisavet</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Michalis</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasia</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Rena</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evi</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Chrysanthi</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yiannis</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Aliki</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrystalla</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Panagiota</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthi</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Zina</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitra</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Eleana</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yioula</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lambros</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SENCO</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasis</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results: Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools offer equal opportunities in education to all children.</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The education system of Cyprus is dysfunctional.</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The structure of the education system hinders teachers’ initiatives.</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to teaching, I always abide by the curriculum.</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers have the power to change the students’ beliefs if they want to.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Interviews (1)

- Restrictive education system
- Problematic decision-making
- Loss of enthusiasm → teacher burnout → compromise
- Bureaucracy and centralization → increased control and pressure to conform
- Curriculum: regulative character → recycles the prevalent power relations
- Main motive: to get a promotion
  
  (Giroux, 2010; Lianos, 2007; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002; Westbury, 2008)

- Inclusive education demands teachers who are ready to recognize and resist the pressure from the power forces
  
  (Erevelles, 2005)

- “The educational system of Cyprus is old-fashioned, centralized and bureaucratic. It renders everything hard. It is not helpful” (Marios, H.T.)
- “In Cyprus we have oligarchy. Hence teachers cannot do anything. The few decide and the rest are obliged to agree” (Aliki, Teacher)
- “The regulations are dry and impersonal. We follow them because the inspector says so. Our motives are to take a promotion not to play a pedagogic role” (Andreas, Teacher)
- “Step by step the system absorbs you and then you lose your enthusiasm and you feel that there is no point anymore” (Lenia, Teacher)
Within the restrictive context, there are teachers that resist the pressure.

Some teachers support that the power is in their hands, teachers can make a change if they want to.

Inclusive education may become a reality.

“I believe that when teachers are inspired, they can make changes within their own space” (Michalis, D.H.T.)

“If teachers co-operate, if there are 5-6 people like this in each school, then you can make a big difference” (Lenia, Teacher)

“I think that teachers have great power” (Lambros, Teacher)

“I always find ways to encourage critical thinking and wake up my students” (Chrystalla, Teacher)
- Even though participants stated that they do not usually differentiate their instruction, they admitted that they try to find ways to respond to the disabled students’ needs through attending relevant seminars or asking advice from more experienced colleagues.
- Since teachers have the freedom to teach texts and poems which are not included in the curriculum, the participants commented that they often choose material that fosters critical thinking and raises awareness towards discrimination, racism and injustice.
Conclusion

- Despite the pressure and the restrictive curriculum, some teachers in Cyprus
  - Venture to employ the role of intellectual thinkers with transformational and emancipating mission
  - Resist the curriculum that fosters exclusion

- Inspired teaching practice can, and does, overcome the barriers imposed by the curriculum and pave the path towards the implementation of inclusive education

(Giroux, 2010; Stenhouse, 2003)
References

Thank you!

Eleni Damianidou: damianidou.eleni@ucy.ac.cy
Helen Phtiaxa: helen@ucy.ac.cy