

Carers as mentors in inclusion: The case of Cyprus

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Abstract: Despite the progress in education in recent years, the marginalization of students identified as having special educational needs (SEN) persists. Students characterized as having SEN is one of the factors that could change the status quo and lead to greater inclusion. The current research project adopted a mixed methodology to investigate this possibility. The research was conducted in five secondary schools in Cyprus, and 138 people participated. As the research is now complete, we can conclude that carers of students characterized as having SEN can act as mentors of both SEN children and non-SEN childrens

Keywords: carers, mentors, inclusion, special unit

Introduction

The term “inclusion”, discussed globally in recent years (Messiou, 2017), refers to the attempt to avoid the marginalization of students characterized as having SEN, with the aim of ensuring their inclusion in general education (Messiou, 2019; Linde, Lemonik, Mikaila, 2015).

In the Cypriot education system, the pursuit of “inclusion” is incompatible with the existence of special units (SU), which contributes to the perpetuation of feelings of marginalization (Charalampous, Papademetriou, 2018). This problem must be resolved as soon as possible.

According to Symeonidou and Phtiaka (2009), the provision of inclusive education in Cypriot schools is hampered by a variety of obstacles, including insufficient teacher training (Symeonidou, 2017), other children’s views on diversity (Messiou, 2019), carers’ views on students characterized as having

SEN, a lack of knowledge among school leaders (Charalampous, Papademetriou, 2019), and the Ministry of Education (Charalampous, Papademetriou, 2021).

Here we need to explain how the Ministry of Education acts an obstacle to the inclusion of students with special needs. Cyprus's education system can be characterized as centralized. School leaders have little power over decisions about the curriculum (goals, schedules, textbooks, etc.) or staffing (hiring, firing, incentives, promotions, etc.). The Ministry of Education shapes the curricula, prioritizing curriculum coverage over addressing the challenges faced by pupils with special educational needs (Hajisoteriou, Angelides, 2016).

Theories of inclusion emphasize that the organization of the school has to change so all students receive a quality education, including those who may experience feelings of exclusion. The school organization is a system that includes the entire school community, such as students, teachers, parents, school management and carers of children with special needs. The above have the potential to positively or negatively influence the school organization. They can therefore play a role in determining whether a school culture is marginalizing or inclusive. Carers could help create an inclusive school culture by acting as mentors for children with special needs.

Systemic theory – The school as a learning organization

Education systems consist of organizational structures, processes, methods, and means whereby society provides systematic education to its members in a variety of fields related to human activity. The intention is to protect social structures and values. Education systems typically have three sub-systems: the society's education level, the provision of educational services and goods, and the mechanisms for covering educational costs. As a result, schools can be described as open systems that communicate with other systems and that are made up of subsystems that interact with one another, such as principals, parents, and teachers (Mason, 2008).

The way organizations operate has changed in different ways over the last few years. As a result, we live in a time of rapid change, and it is up to schools to ensure that their staff collaborate, learn, and apply new knowledge. These modifications are usually the result of continuous learning and an effort to adapt to the environment (Dixon, 1994). Such changes have occurred in educational organizations that are attempting to change. As a re-

sult, in order to effect change, education officials are attempting to transform schools into learning organizations (Geleta, Tafesse, 2017).

A school-learning organization's vision is to assist children in their quest for effective learning and overall development (Bakker, 2012). Simultaneously, a culture is gradually emerging, whereby teachers' seek to achieve personal ambitions that are in line with the school's vision (Vanhoof et al., 2009).

Learning organizations that transform schools will of course require close collaboration between individual, group, and organizational learning. As a result, learning organizations have to ensure that students develop strong social and emotional skills so they can cope with an ever-changing environment (Kools and Stoll, 2016). To accomplish this, schools must first cultivate a culture open to new ideas (Kruse, 2003).

The collective ambition of the school organization's members feeds into a continuous desire to learn as members of the organization and to the formation of professional learning communities (Vanhoof et al., 2009). Educators in a professional learning community have opportunities to share and evaluate their practice in the context of collaboration. They can also impart knowledge, create innovations, and influence its members' behavior.

Carers of Students Characterized as Having Special Needs

Carers of students identified as having special needs are unquestionably part of the educational system and contribute to the effective development of a learning organization. Carers play an important role in promoting the inclusion of students who have been characterized as having special needs (Giangreco et al., 2004; Day, 2019). Their importance in students' future educational paths is acknowledged internationally (Wise and Glass, 2000). That is why the entire school community has to find a way to collaborate effectively with carers (Giangreco, Doyle, 2002). But first, let's look at their duties and responsibilities, which, according to the Cyprus Ministry of Education (2009), are focused on:

"Care of children with special needs, confidentiality, help organizing and carrying out activities, cleanliness of children, transportation of children in and out of school and cooperation with the management and staff of the school".

Their responsibilities include attending seminars as indicated by the Ministry of Education (http://www.scholikieforeialefkosias.org.cy/myfiles/entypa/scholikos_voithos_synodos_gia_paidia_eidikes_anagkes_prosonta.pdf). Carers support children characterized as having SEN and facilitate their teaching.

It is possible that some carers in Cyprus hold marginalizing attitudes because they are only educated to secondary level and do not possess the academic qualifications that would enable them to help students characterized as having SEN. This situation is a consequence of the fact that under the Ministry of Education and Culture (2009a) regulations, the minimum qualifications for attendants are a High School Diploma and Health Certificate, although some may hold a higher education degree in special education, kindergarten, psychology, nursing, social work or similar (http://www.scholikieforeialefkosias.org.cy/myfiles/entypa/scholikos_voithos_synodos_gia_paidia_eidikes_anagkes_prosonta.pdf).

Creating Mentoring Relationships

According to Charalampous and Papademetriou (2018), school environments in Cyprus marginalize students characterized as having SEN. Some school coefficients, according to Mukhopadhyay, et. al. (2019), may even contribute to addressing marginalization.

Curtin, Malley and Stewart (2016) point out inclusive cultures could be promoted through the establishment of mentoring relationships. The term “mentor” is used in connection to the most well-known strategies for providing individual guidance and support (Bezzina, 2006) to students.

Mentoring is a promising mechanism with the potential to help ensure that students who have been characterized as having SEN are included in both the school community and society generally. Mentors can serve as role models, share their experiences (Cook, 2011) and knowledge (Bugaj et al., 2019), and thereby ensure the most effective inclusion possible (Lindsay, 2018).

There are six key characteristics of effective mentors who work in either mainstream classrooms or special units to develop such relationships: willingness to provide positive or negative feedback, honesty, willingness to share knowledge, and willingness to help their mentee grow (Williams, 2016).

Mentoring relationships can also evolve organically. Establishing such relationships with SEN students can prove difficult. As a result, it would be critical to develop a mentoring relationship program for the sole purpose of working towards the full inclusion of students characterized as having SEN (Burgstahler and Crawford, 2007).

According to Lindsay (2018), the benefits of a mentoring program involving students characterized as having SEN include academic and job skills, psychological health, quality of life, and life skills. According to Garringer and MacRae (2008), a mentoring relationship development program that works between students with and without SEN, with the support of adults, and especially with the support of school administration, is likely to produce positive results (Makovec, 2018). So carers could promote inclusion by developing mentoring relationships with both sets of pupils.

A common long-term goal of mentoring programs is to improve the quality of life of students characterized as having SEN. This is typically achieved through the exchange of experiences between classmates, with the primary goal of increasing their self-esteem (Whelley et al., 2003).

According to Hochstatter (2012), fostering empathy (O'Hara, 2011) is essential to developing mentoring relationships between students with SEN and students without SEN. According to Hogan (1969), "empathy" is a person's ability to empathize with the situation of another person without having had the same experience.

Methodology

The primary goal of the present study was to investigate how carers of students characterized as having SEN contribute to the inclusion of students attending special units (SUs), through the creation of an action plan developed in the context of this study. The investigation of this specific parameter is directly related to the larger research effort to identify why inclusive ideas has not been implemented in five secondary schools in Cyprus. The main research questions that guided the study are as follows:

- What factors influence carers' efforts to include SEN students?
- How could carers of students characterized as having SEN help foster the inclusion of students attending SUs?

A mixed methodology approach is one of the most objective research methods and is suitable for investigating this research topic (Creswell, 2014). It is used to collect data using a variety of research tools, such as interviews, observations, and questionnaires. It combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies and allows data triangulation (Rendani, Sipho, 2012). Furthermore, the findings can be generalized to obtain a deeper understanding, providing greater validity and reliability (Ponce, Pagán-Maldonado, 2014). According to Klette (2012), mixed methodology is used to limit criticisms because of qualitative method for subjectivity.

The research sample comprises 138 adults. Specifically, 82 teachers, 15 carers of students characterized as having SEN, 13 parents of students characterized as having SEN and 25 parents of students without SEN. Sixty-four percent of the adult participants were male and 36% female. Most participants were in the 45-54 age group (52%), while 31% were in the 35-44 age group and 17% were older than 55. The criterion for selecting the teachers who took part in the research was mainly if they taught SU students, either in the SU or the mainstream classroom. Parent participants were selected because their children were taught in classes that included SU students or because their children were SU students. In addition, 122 students participated in the survey, 32 of whom were taught in an SU. The research was carried out in Cyprus from October 2018 to December 2018 in five secondary schools with an SU. The data are still up-to-date and relevant as there has been no change in the legislation on special education, or in the way schools and SUs are run, or in the duties and responsibilities of carers for children with special needs.

It is worth noting that all the SU students at these schools took part in the research, as did the carers of the students characterized as having SEN. Each carer was responsible for two or three SU students. The participating schools were a school in Limassol, one in Larnaca, one in Nicosia and two in Paphos.

Given the methodology, “sequential exploratory strategy” is the most logical choice. It is a mixed form of data collection that prioritizes qualitative research and integrates both methods (Creswell, 2014). The research stages include data collection and sequential analysis.

‘Sequential exploratory strategy’ is mainly used to explain relationships between individuals. It is applied when the researcher wishes to further analyze mixed study results or obtain information for conducting a quantita-

tive study. The researcher follows three stages: collecting and then analyzing the qualitative data, and using that analysis to develop an instrument targeting the sample population. It is suitable for use in educational research (Creswell, 2014). Figure 1 depicts the “sequential exploratory strategy” in greater detail:

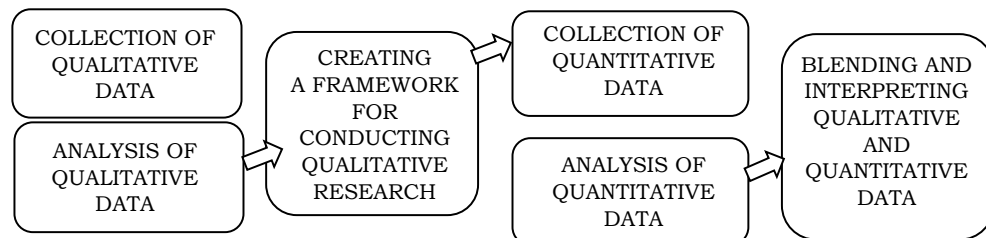


Figure 1: Sequential exploratory strategy

For the purposes of the qualitative data analysis we used grounded theory (Strauss, Corbin, 1990). It is an interpretive, constructivist method that allows participants to present their point of view, which can then be combined with the point of view of the researchers (Hutchinson, 1998). Specifically, we chose systematic design, one of the three types of design proposed by grounded theory (systematic, emerging and constructivist design), consisting of three stages: coding, nominal open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2014).

Although grounded theory is primarily used to analyze qualitative data, it can, according to Johnson (2008), also be used to analyze quantitative data. Aiming at the overall analysis of the mixed data, we quantified the qualitative data and qualitatively quantified the quantitative data. That involved converting the qualitative data from words or images into numbers by reading, coding, presenting, and interpreting them. In addition, quantitative data were correlated with the interview and observation data.

The research tools used to conduct the research were the questionnaire, individual semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and focus groups. The research took one month in the 2018/2019 school year. First the teachers were informed about the content of the questionnaire before completing the questionnaire, a process that lasted approximately 20 minutes. The interviews took approximately 10 minutes each, the focus groups approximately 20 minutes, and the observations approximately 40 minutes. The individual interviews and focus groups were conducted in the assistant principal’s office in the morning. The observations were conducted in classrooms, in the school yard, and in the school event hall.

A special feature of the research was that different research tools were used for the different participant groups. Table 1 provides an overview of the groups of the participants and also the tools which have been used during the research.

Table 1: Research tools and participants

PARTICIPANTS		REASEARCH TOOLS			
		Questionnaire	Observations	Interviews	Focus groups
	Teachers	82	82	82	82
	Carers	-----	15	15	15
	Parents of SEN students	-----	-----	13	13
	Parents of non SEN students	-----	-----	25	25
	Mainstream education Students	-----	90	90	90
	SU students	-----	-----	32	-----

The questionnaire consists of two parts: Part A: Demographic Data, Part B: Views on the role of the carers of students characterized as having SEN. The closed-ended questions in Parts B and C of the questionnaire were answered on a five-point scale (Likert scale), which meant they could choose from the following answers: 1: Completely disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither Disagree/Neither Agree, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree.

The qualitative data were collected using audio recordings and field notes. After the analysis, the mixed data were returned to the participants, for their agreement or disagreement. Here there was the additional goal of ensuring that the results were not rushed. The qualitative data related to their impressions, environment, verbal and non-verbal behaviors. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The analysis of the quantitative data showed that Cronbach's α , the reliability coefficient, was satisfactory ($\alpha=0.767$), indicating that the level of agreement between the questions selected and the Likert scale (questions with five options) was satisfactory. The interview and observation data were returned to the participants before the completion of the research, and the data were then destroyed six months after the completion of the research. In our opinion, the above data proves the validity and reliability of the research.

Regarding the research ethics, all participants were invited to give voluntary consent to the basic conditions of the research by signing the “Consent Form for Participation in Research”. It was made clear to the participants that they could withdraw their consent at any time during the research without consequences. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the principals of the schools participating in the research. Participants were assured that we would respect their confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research.

Results

As previously stated, the first stage of the mixed methodology research was the qualitative part. For this reason, the researchers attempted to foster a friendly atmosphere in interactions with the participants, so they would feel comfortable participating in the research. Firstly, the researchers held a general discussion in the form of a focus group with the carers of students characterized as having SEN to explore their perspectives on their role in implementing inclusion in the schools where they work. Some examples of their views are the following:

“The existence of the special unit prevents us from working towards the inclusion of students with special needs” (Ms. Maria-carer-school 3)

„If the Ministry gave us the freedom to place the children in the mainstream classroom all day, it would be fine. But it’s not possible“ (Mr. Giannis-carer-school 1)

“The laws and regulations on the rights of students with special needs in education have greatly helped inclusion. Many times, however, it deprives them of their rights. We are obliged to follow the law. We cannot put the children in regular classes whenever we want“ (Mr. Kostas-carer-school 1)

„It’s not just the laws that are to blame. We don’t have the knowledge to help children belong to the whole. What we’ve learned, we’ve learned from experience“ (Ms. Ioanna-carer-school 4)

„Okay, we are hired as carers with a basic high school diploma. They are doing well! They give people jobs. But we must educate ourselves to learn how to handle the children. If you keep trying to put them in the regular classroom...things get more complicated“ (Ms. Georgia-carer-school 5)

After studying these opinions and quantifying the qualitative data, we established that 1) caring students who are characterized as having SEN are aware that inclusion is probably not being fully promoted in Cyprus's secondary schools, 2) the reason for this is that some of the students characterized as having SEN are placed in the SUs and are therefore isolated from the other students, 3) The Ministry of Education is not flexible enough and retains strict control over the students' education framework, rather than more of it being assigned to the SUs; and 4) the institutional framework of special education limits what can be done; carers lack the academic grounding that could lead to inclusion; and the minimum recruitment criteria is possession of the High School Diploma. The results of the qualitative part of the research are validated by the quantitative data presented in table 1 below. The research participants, who come from the five schools, appear to agree on the challenges they face in their efforts to create an inclusive culture.

Combining the qualitative and quantitative data has its benefits. We specifically investigated the extent to which the belief that "school culture allows carers to foster the inclusion of students characterized as having SEN" correlates with the statements shown in table 1.

Table 2: Barriers to carers performing an inclusive role

My school culture allows carers to contribute to the inclusion of students characterized as having SEN		
The school head can help to strengthen the role of carers seeking to foster the inclusion of students characterized as having SEN	r	-.372
	p. value	.001
Teachers work effectively with carers of students characterized as having SEN	r	-.217
	p. value	.030
The special education legislation leads to the inclusion of students characterized as having SEN	R	-.468
	p. value	.010
Students without SEN socialize with students characterized as having SEN	R	-.221
	p. value	.005
Parents of students with SEN and parents of students without SEN contribute to efforts to include students characterized as having SEN	r	-.105
	p. value	.001

The values of the Pearson r coefficient in table 1 show a negative one-to-one correlation between the variables "The school head can help to strengthen the role of carers seeking to foster the inclusion of students characterized as having SEN", "Teachers work effectively with carers of students characterized as having SEN", "Legislation related to special education leads to the

inclusion of students characterized as having SEN”, “Students without SEN socialize with students characterized as having SEN” and “Parents of students with and without SEN contribute to efforts to include students characterized as having SEN. The analysis of the data led to the conclusion that potential efforts by carers to improve the inclusion process were hindered by the head, teachers, legislation, students without SEN and parents.

We proceeded, in consultation with the heads of the five participating schools, to further investigate the role of carers of students characterized as having SEN in the implementation of inclusion. The carers were tasked with contributing to the implementation of an action plan in their schools aimed at more effective inclusion of SU students.

The program was designed by the researchers, who guided the research participants. The school head, parents, teachers, students without SEN, and carers were all kept informed about the action plan implementation process and goals prior to implementation. The following were the main actions of the action stage, in addition to the overall goal of including SU students in mainstream classes for as many teaching periods as possible: 1) Carers discreetly supervise SU students during the lesson, as well as during breaks and other activities. 2) Creation of a unified timetable (for all departments and the SU), 3) carers attending teaching staff meetings so that they are not isolated and 4) the creation of mentoring relationships between carers and students.

Carers were thus tasked with overseeing the partial rehabilitation of the SU students in order to facilitate their socialization and, by extension, inclusion, as effectively as possible. It is worth studying the account of an incident relating to the role of carers of students characterized as having SEN in the inclusion of SU students at this point. Mr. Kostas, assistant head (school 2), stated:

“...students were still under the supervision of the carers. They were specifically instructed maintaining eye contact with the children. However, in order to implement something like this, management made sure that the mainstream classrooms were close to the SU classroom. Of course, this project posed several technical challenges, the majority of which related to the existing building facilities, but also to the number of students with SEN. Carers for children with special needs were initially limited to two per nine children, but after several requests to the District Education Office, they were increased to three”.

Let us turn to the views of a student characterized as having SEN. Mrs. Maria (teacher-school 1) stated:

"I am overjoyed with the outcome of my efforts. I was delighted to be a part of it. It is crucial to see the satisfaction in the children's eyes because they feel they are gradually becoming like the others."

The attempt to implement inclusion resulted in efforts to include SU students in mainstream classes for as many teaching periods as possible, or the entire day where possible. This applied to all five schools, affected the school timetable and led to significant tensions in the school. According to the head (school 5) of one of the five schools:

"To accommodate the new requirement, we had to change the timetables of many teachers and students. We also had classroom issues because some of the children in the Unit had mobility problems and couldn't climb the stairs. And this had an impact on the program."

It is also worth noting that some of the teachers of the classes that were to have SU students in them responded negatively. At the beginning we have to confess that we thought this was absurd. Then we realized that there were good reasons for their concerns. The words of teacher Mrs. Ellis (school 3) are indicative:

"I know you think we are absurd for not wanting children with special needs to join our classes. I can see it in your eyes. But let me tell you why. It is difficult to have a child in the classroom who has such problems. You can't raise the tone of your voice because they immediately get upset. And the carers on the other hand who have to be in the class with the children....it's a problem...Um...No matter how we do it, it's difficult to have another adult in the classroom during your lesson, you feel uncomfortable. And let's not forget that you have to adapt your teaching to each student. Think about having others in the class who want...how do you say it...er...differentiation?...alternative? We also have laboratories with hazardous materials. What are we to do with them at that time?...just watch? Has anyone thought about whether we have the knowledge to help these children?"

Participatory observation could help us understand concerns such as this teacher's. Ms. Antigoni, (teacher-school 4), while teaching a mainstream Greek lesson:

“I was in the classroom for a lesson. A loud noise startled me. I could see about a dozen students fleeing the classroom. A girl from the Special Unit was following them. The students returned to class, and the Special Unit girl was chasing them, shouting and throwing objects at them. The attendants and teacher both attempted in vain to calm her down. When the bell rang, I approached the teacher and the carer. They explained to me that the student was angry because she got upset whenever she saw a pen. She would only write with a pencil. But she was very upset because all the children were writing with pens, which had never happened before. When the other kids saw her acting like that, they became terrified and fled.”

Our analysis of the interviews and observations showed that the difficulties associated with socializing students characterized as having SEN may be a reason for their eventual marginalization. We therefore focused on social skills.

As a result, the teacher responsible for each SU drew up a timetable for the carers. The timetable, of course, included not only the supervision of the children, but also the carers break times.

The aim of the new weekly timetable of the carers was to ensure the SU operated as smoothly as possible, given that the innovations meant the students could not all be in the same place at the same time, and the need to ensure that supervision, but also instructions to be followed was easy.

This idea that having carers acting as mentors is crucial to creating an inclusive culture is supported by the quantitative data presented in table 2.

Table 3: Participants' views on the inclusive role of carers

	Carers of students characterized as having SEN	Teachers	Heads	Parents
The prevailing school culture allows carers to contribute to the inclusion of students characterized as having SEN	11%	17%	59%	13%

The research participants' opinions on ways in which carers of students characterized as having SEN could strengthen the creation of an inclusive culture both inside and outside the school is also useful. Table 3 lists participant suggestions for ways in which carers can strengthen inclusion, based on the analysis of the quantitative data.

Table 4: Carers and creating an inclusive culture

Carers of students characterized as having SEN can help create an inclusive culture		
Carers of students characterized as having SEN can guide the students in socialization	R	.223
	p. value	.001
Carers of students characterized as having SEN can guide the students in cooperating with their teachers and classmates	r	.101
	p. value	.007
Carers of students characterized as having SEN can direct mainstream students to acquire inclusive behavior	R	.452
	p. value	.011
Carers of students characterized as having SEN can act as role models of inclusive behavior	R	-.387
	p. value	.010

The values of the Pearson r coefficient in table 3 show a negative correlation between the variable “Carers of students characterized as having SEN can help create an inclusive culture” and the following: “Carers of students characterized as having SEN can guide the students in socialization”, “Carers of students characterized as having SEN can guide the students in cooperating with their teachers and classmates”, “Carers of students characterized as having SEN can direct mainstream students to acquire inclusive behavior”, “Carers of students characterized as having SEN can be role models of good behavior”. The data analysis relating to these correlations leads to the conclusion that participants believe that carers of students characterized as having SEN can assist students with SEN and thereby enhance the potential of inclusion.

This is confirmed by the subsequent qualitative part of the research (follow-up research strategy). A student without SEN (*school 1*) gave the following opinion:

“What is more important is the personality of the carer how they feel about students with special needs and if they really want to help them attain the same rights as other students”

A teacher (*school 4*) stated:

“We could not say that carers can act as mentors only for children with special needs. They know the difficulties firsthand. I believe that they can guide the rest of the children to learn to behave in inclusive way”

The quantification of the qualitative data confirms the results of the quantitative part of the research. The analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data highlights the need to strengthen the responsibilities of carers of students characterized as having SEN as they could play a major part in creating and maintaining an inclusive culture in secondary schools.

After the analysis, researchers, in collaboration with the participants, took action to support carers as mentors in creating an inclusive school climate.

The group of mentors-carers were guided by the Vocational Guidance Counselor, in one of the schools, in cooperation with two researchers. According to the Ministry of Education, teachers who are counsellors undertake to provide assistance to students so they can gain self-awareness and self-acceptance and adapt to the school and social environment (Counseling and Vocational Education Service, 2015). It is also worth mentioning that, according to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2009), to ensure the work of the SU is satisfactory, the counselor-teacher at the school has a duty to provide emotional support for children characterized as having SEN, and help them develop the social skills required and adapt to the school environment. This, of course, requires cooperation with the assistant head for special education, the liaison officer for special education and education and all others involved.

The team of carers took it upon themselves to teach students characterized as having SEN the social skills required for inclusion that were lacking in some pupils. It was decided that these skills were best taught indirectly in both SU and mainstream classrooms through a cross-curricular approach. The following observation, described by a researcher, is a good example:

“The teacher was trying to teach the basic principles of good behavior to students in the mainstream class, which included some SU students. First, she showed them videos, pictures and played games to teach them the basics: thank you...please...can I... The teacher was a philologist, so she brought them texts related to the development of social skills. The carer in that class provided additional support, reminding the students to follow the behavior rules they had learned, both in the lesson and during break. The children initially resented this. John kept getting up to leave the classroom. On the second or third attempt things changed. A few days later they began practicing the things they had learned in their relationships with their classmates.”

This observation shows the effectiveness of the interaction between students with SEN and those without SEN. It demonstrates that carers are able to collaborate with teachers to provide guidance to the student group as a whole, without stigmatizing specific groups of students. That seems to produce better results. Another observation from a math lessons is also noteworthy. The researcher, who was in the class during the math lesson, stated:

“On entering the special unit I saw the math teacher handing out fake money to the students characterized as having SEN. They were then instructed to act out roles. One student assumed the role of shopkeeper and the others the role of customers. They were excited. Kostas said proudly: “I’m the boss. I have the best shop.” Continuing, Eleni said, “I have the most money, I will buy three things and if you want I will give you something. Then the escort accompanied the children to the supermarket opposite the school to put into practice what they learned about financial transactions”

Here the emphasis was on the need for cooperation between the SU teachers, the mainstream teachers and the carers of the students characterized as having SEN.

Below are excerpts from interviews in which participants suggest some good practices used by mentors to promote inclusive culture:

“The children were rewarded every time they followed the rules of good behavior. Usually this was done in front of classmates from the general class to encourage them” (teacher-school 2)

“If they didn’t behave correctly, we invited them to give feedback and think about how they should behave” (carer-school 3)

“As for the children in the general class, we helped them to express empathy so they could put themselves in the shoes of the children characterized as having special needs” (carer-school 1)

“Without cooperation with everyone associated with the school and without encouragement there can be no mentoring relationship” (mainstream education student-school 5)

At this point it is worth considering the opinions of Mr. George (school 4), a carer for students characterized as having SEN:

“Although things can sometimes seem self-evident, they are not. Many of us thought our students were old enough to be taught manners or to learn how to handle money. These are a necessary to have been taught for someone to be able to belong to society. I think this effort made will help us a lot.”

In addition, we quote Maria (teacher school 2):

“I think it worked! It helped them feel part of the whole [class]! We also got closer to the students by teaching them social skills. It was an interdisciplinary effort and that was very good because something taught by one teacher was also requested as social skill by any teacher. The role of the attendants was essential. The students were on the one hand hindering what was being taught, and on the other hand they realized that life is not divided into boxes and lessons and that we use all those we have learned in our everyday lives.”

The same opinion is reinforced by some other carers, who acted as mentors:

“You need a lot of patience. You have to show the other person, whoever they are, whatever their differences, that you respect them for who they are” (Anna, carer, school 2).

By the end of the research, participants and researchers felt that efforts to include students characterized as having SEN could be strengthened by establishing both teacher-student mentoring relationships and student-student ones.

Discussion and Results

To conclude, the research results made us realize that creating an inclusive culture is no easy task. It is time-consuming and no-one can guarantee that it will still be in place in future. Using a mixed research methodology, we investigated the views of teachers, management, parents, and carers in five secondary schools in Cyprus on the role carers play in ensuring effective lasting inclusion of students characterized as having SEN.

Towards the end of the research, we concluded that carers of students characterized as having SEN could make a significant contribution to the wider school community's efforts to create an inclusive culture, a view ad-

vocated by Giangreco, et. al. (2010). Factors inhibiting carers' efforts are: 1) the existence of an SU in the school, 2) the mainstream school climate (views of management, teachers, parents, students without SEN, 3) incomplete planning, 4) the range of student cases the carer has and 5) in some cases the challenges inherent in collaboration between teachers and carers for students characterized as having SEN.

Studying the results of the research we can conclude that although the role of the carers may be marginalizing, the research findings prove that carers can help create an inclusive culture by taking on a mentoring role.

Carers are key to promoting inclusive education (Lichte, Scheef, 2022). They can guide interaction between students with and without special needs as they know firsthand how to prevent the feeling of marginalization. They can also strengthen cooperation between teachers, as well as between teachers, carers and students in order to make the school as inclusive as possible. Finally, they play a key role in fostering self-confidence in students with special needs and helping them on their journey to the desired inclusion.

The research contains some limitations. Specifically, the limitations of the sample meant we could not generalize from it. Another limitation could be the fact that the questionnaire respondents were all teachers at the schools in the study. Consequently we cannot examine the opinions of the other participants based on the quantitative data. Although, even if we could we would run the risk of the identity of the participants (e.g. carers) being revealed through correlation with their demographic data (e.g. gender, age).

Finally, we must point out that the research left us with the impression that despite the problems faced by teachers in their efforts to create an inclusive school culture, all those involved showed great willingness and positivity. It is this that we must keep in mind as we continue our efforts to make secondary school teaching in Cyprus as inclusive as possible.

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