

# EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF THE CURRICULUM

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# Background (1)

- 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)

# Background (2)

- 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?



# Context

- 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)

Characteristics		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	209	39%
	Female	327	61%
Position	Teacher	452	85%
	Administration	77	15%
School type	Gymnasium	224	42%
	Lyceum	198	37%
	Technical School	93	18%
	Second Chance School	17	3%
Academic level	BA	315	59%
	MA/MSc	198	37%
	PhD	21	4%



# Demographics: Survey (2)

- 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

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

# Results: Survey

Item	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Schools offer equal opportunities in education to all children.	263	49.6%	100	18.9%	167	31.5%
The education system of Cyprus is dysfunctional.	99	18.5%	98	18.3%	338	63.2%
The structure of the education system hinders teachers' initiatives.	81	15.3%	94	17.8%	353	66.9%
When it comes to teaching, I always abide by the curriculum.	123	23.2%	137	25.8%	270	50.9%
Teachers have the power to change the students' beliefs if they want to.	35	6.6%	100	18.9%	394	74.5%

# 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” (Alik, 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)*

# Results: Interviews (2)

- 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  
(Armstrong, 2005)

- *“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)*

# Results: Interviews (3)

- 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)

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# Thank you!



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