

# Inclusion or Exclusion? The Role of Special Tutoring and Education District Committees in Special Secondary Education Units in Cyprus

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## Abstract

The paper examines the role of the Special Tutoring and Education District Committee (STEDC) in moving children in, as well as out of, Special Secondary Education Units (SSEUs) in Cyprus. SSEUs were introduced as part of the effort to make mainstream education inclusive. By law, the STEDC is the body responsible for children with special needs attending these SSEUs, including the initial decision to place them in the system. To better understand the STEDC's role, this paper performs a case study of two separate high school SSEUs in Cyprus.

## Keywords

Special Secondary Education Units, Special Tutoring and Education District Committee, Inclusive Education

## I. Introduction

According to Lauchlan and Greig (2015), "Inclusion" has become an increasingly important pedagogical term over the last few decades, in the context of the special education sector. While inclusion as a general term refers to the "Right of all children and adults to fully participate, and contribute in all aspects of life and culture, without restriction or threat of marginalization" (Braunsteiner and Mariano-Lapidus, 2014, pp. 32), in the context of education, it is generally accepted that it relates to the capacity of schools to include those that may have special needs, learning difficulties or behavioral issues, diverse sexual orientations and those belonging to different cultures (Celoria, 2016), religions or speaking other mother tongues (Suleymanov, 2015).

This paper will carry out an in-depth study of the secondary education system in Cyprus, as it relates to special needs students, so as to be able to suggest gradual, long-term and sustainable improvement.

## II. The Cyprus Context

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education breaks down Member States' inclusion policy in the following three categories (2007): The first, in which Cyprus belongs, is called the "one-track approach", which is a policy of including almost all special needs pupils in mainstream education. Of course, the policy specifies "almost all" special needs pupils because some are left out of inclusive education. The next category is called the "multi-track approach", which combines approaches from both the mainstream as well as the special education system. The third category is called the "two-track approach", promoting two separate educational systems, in which children with special needs are segregated into special schools or special classes, distinct from the mainstream schooling attended by non-special needs students.

The debate on inclusive education in Cyprus is ongoing (Greenberg and Greenberg, 2016). Inclusive education was introduced into the Cypriot educational system via the "Law of Education of Children with Special Needs of 1999" (N.113(I)/99, here in after 'the 1999

law'). Subsequent amendments to the legislation were implemented in 2001 (N. 69(I)/2001, here in after 'the 2001 regulation'), in 2013 (via Circular 416/2013, here in after 'the 2013 circular'), and in 2014, via updated legislation (N.87(I)/2014, here in after 'the 2014 law'). What has been witnessed is that, despite efforts to make the educational system inclusive, Cyprus has instead favored integration (Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2009).

The term integration encompasses interaction of children with special needs with the mainstream education system (Phtiaka, 1999). Despite its positive-sounding connotations, in practice, it has led to integration into the mainstream educational system for some special needs students, while some others have experienced exclusion (Rodriguez and Garro-Gil, 2014). More specifically, secondary school in Cyprus is set up to include mixed-ability groups, which has presented enormous difficulties in both teaching and learning efforts have been made to supplement the education of students with certain learning difficulties via extra study groups, but this approach cannot work for all children with special needs. These students are taught through Special Secondary Education Units (SSEUs).

## III. Special Secondary Education Units

SSEUs are a powerful factor in promoting inclusive education for students with special needs. We must therefore explore their role. SSEUs were set up as part of the Cyprus Ministry of Education's efforts to establish a framework for inclusion in the Cypriot educational system. According to 1999 law and 2001 regulation addressing the education of children with special needs, SSEUs should aim towards "Integration and inclusion into 'ordinary' schools, operating in comfortable and accessible places for children with special needs. The Headmaster of the 'ordinary' school in which the Special Unit is housed is responsible for its operation".

The Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of Children, must ensure the application of the 1999 law and its related regulations, so that children attending special schools are receiving an equal education. This responsibility is paired with an obligation to harmonize local law with international legislation regarding inclusive education. In essence, the 1999 law has made it clear that children with special needs have the right to education to the fullest extent possible, also stressing that it is the Cypriot government who is responsible for their education and inclusion.

## IV. Legal Framework for the Operation of SSEUs

It is critical to examine the legal framework that determines the operation of SSEUs in order to better understand the current educational practices with regard to special education in Cyprus. Inclusive education was introduced into the Cypriot educational system via the 1999 law as well as subsequent amendments to the legislation in 2001, 2013 and 2014, as mentioned above.

The number of children attending an SSEU is determined by the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture, and usually ranges

from two to eight children per team. A school may have more than one team. According to the 2013 circular, these children should receive a Certificate of Attendance twice a year. The certificate grades the children as “good”, “very good” or “excellent”, based on the academic progress achieved in their SSEU classes. Children enrolled in the SSEU follow a specific timetable prepared by the school’s management with the help of a special education liaison officer, a specialized Assistant Professor and the school’s career guidance advisor. The 2013 circular stipulates that this must be approved by the Special Secondary Education Office.

Pupils of the Specialized Unit should all be included in a department of the general school. Depending on their class they should be withdrawn for special training in the Specialized Unit, especially during core examinations but be included in courses where they can follow, cultivate and develop social and individual skills.

In the first three years of high school, it is recommended that these students study Home Economics, Art, Music, Gymnastics, Computing and Technology with the mainstream class. Students then go on to a lyceum (high school), where they attend school three times a week. Some of their subjects are taught in the general class and others in the SSEU, and for the other two days a week, they attend special educational programs outside the school. SSEUs also operate in technical schools, such as those providing courses in hospitality and hairdressing, which allow for minimum integration with mainstream classes.

In middle school, high school, as well as technical schools, the proposed tailoring of individual curricula for each student attending SSEUs, is rather difficult to achieve. It’s challenging for school administrations to prepare a tailored program for each child, within the context of a broader, workable timetable catering to the needs of the rest of the school. Challenges are made worse by the lack of qualified teaching staff, and the difficulty in meeting the learning needs of each pupil individually. What we can conclude from the above is that the support provided by the Ministry with regards to SSEUs in lyceums and technical schools is, at best, incomplete. It can be argued that the legal framework and regulations relating to inclusive education are clear and broadly governed by an inclusive philosophy. However, confusion between inclusive and special education can often be witnessed due to a lack of guidance in interpretation and implementation (Liasidou, 2011).

Another issue is the fact that the STEDC does not provide extensive clarification and justification about decisions made regarding students referred to them for evaluation. In most cases, a brief letter is produced by the STEDC, simply informing that the student who has been referred for evaluation will join the Special Unit or attend support courses, without giving parents a clear explanation as to their decision-making process. The Commissioner for Children’s Rights reports that she has received complaints about the standardized nature of the STEDC reports (Commissioner for the Rights of the Child, 2011). For the legislation to be effective, it must target the very structure of the educational system in order to cater to students with special needs, without excluding them due to their differences. The legislation should, for example, focus on the need to have smaller mainstream classes (Bouer, 2013) and the creation of an individual program for each pupil. In addition, educational policy around special needs students should not be prescriptive, but rather supply a variety of options, from which each school can choose the best fit (Avissar, Licht and Vogel, 2016).

## V. Challenges Faced by SSEUs

At this point, we believe that examining SSEU issues in more detail, would be very useful. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2007) states that children attending SSEUs in public schools in Cyprus must enjoy the same school hours and subjects as the rest of the children. Based on their specialized needs, they should have most of their timetable and syllabus the same as that of the mainstream students, while also fully participating in school events. The Agency also states that a special needs student’s participation in the class syllabus should be determined according to his or her needs.

The current literature on SSEUs in Cyprus sets out the ongoing issue of including pupils with special needs within mainstream schools (Phtiaka, 2006; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2007). This is said to be due to the operational framework of the Special Unit, which usually does not follow the guidelines regarding the inclusion of pupils, but instead reproduces the special education system within the mainstream school. The operation of SSEUs and inclusive education in general must in any case be characterized by a flexible and accessible curriculum for children with special needs. This includes easily accessible school premises for the disabled; tailored teaching and evaluation methods; and specially trained staff (Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2009).

## VI. The Special Tutoring and Education District Committee (STEDC)

The proper functioning of an SSEU is to a large extent determined by the manner in which students are assigned to the Special Unit. This is determined by the STEDC, which is responsible for the assessment of pupils who are facing difficulties at school. These students can be referred to the STEDC either by teachers or their parents. The STEDC is authorized by the Cyprus Ministry of Education to decide whether a child can be best served by receiving special education.

According to the 1999 law, the STEDC of a district must be chaired by a Ministry-appointed Primary Education Officer and also include a representative from the Ministry’s relevant education department, a special education teacher, an educational psychologist, a clinical psychologist, a social worker and a speech therapist.

Under the 2001 regulation, the STEDC is obliged to respond to a referral within two weeks. Before a decision can be made, each child must be individually assessed by each specialist member of the STEDC. In our opinion this is a key point: The regulation is not clear enough, a fact that causes difficulties in assessing the pupil. Also, another issue may be the ‘transparency’ regarding the manner in which the assessment is carried out.

In the UK, a similar approach is taken, with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2016) requiring a team of professionals to decide if a pupil should attend mainstream or special classes. The decision is reviewed by each school on a regular basis.

Looking at Cyprus, however, the question remains whether the STEDC should decide if a child should be placed in the Special Unit. This concern is worthy of investigation since there are cases where children who are simply weak students, as opposed to having special needs, that are being placed in SSEUs (Phtiaka, 2006). Demetriou (2014) notes that the Cyprus Report of the Directorate-General for Internal Policies, which evaluates the policies of member states concerning children with special needs, highlights one of the weaknesses of the Cypriot education system, specifically, the large number of referrals that are made

by schools to the STEDC, resulting in long delays in assessments and evaluations. In many cases, schools refer children to the STEDC without adequately trying to support them in their learning difficulties, choosing instead to suggest that those children would be better off under a special needs education system. As Demetriou pointed out, “teaching staff in mainstream schools do not assume their share of the responsibility when it comes to integrating children with special needs into the school and prefer to shift this responsibility to special teachers and liaison officers” (2014, pp. 14).

In conclusion, it may be argued that STEDCs are faced with a lot of problems in the efforts to include pupils with special needs. We need further examination, with the key question centering around an examination of whether STEDCs is effective in carrying out their duty.

## VII. Methodology

The main focus of this research is on the decision-making process of STEDCs. In order to closely examine the role of the STEDC in placing children in SSEUs, we ask two research questions:

1. What is the role of the STEDC in promoting inclusion for SSEU students?
2. Which factors influence the role of STEDC in placing children into an SSEU?

The research was conducted in two SSEUs, using a triangulation technique. The district in which the two schools were located was selected randomly. The results were compared in order to cross-check the findings and secure reliable results. We used qualitative research methods, more specifically, case studies. In order to reinforce the triangulation capability of the research, data collection was based on field observations and notes, formal and also informal interviews. In total, 32 Teachers, 5 Assistant Head teachers and 1 Special Education Liaison Officer took part in the research.

We chose this methodology because of the delicate and sensitive nature of our investigation. Participants were made to feel comfortable in talking about sensitive issues related to the Ministry of Education. We believe that qualitative research gives them the opportunity to best express their views. The use of questionnaires or written interviews were not deemed sufficient on their own; a case study allows participants to act as they normally would and be less likely to hold back.

Prior to carrying out the case study, we also carried out a review of the relevant legislation and regulations around special needs education in Cyprus. Researchers also went to the schools on a daily basis throughout the case study, taking notes, attending meetings with the SSEU staff, as well as meetings between SSEU pupils' parents and specialized teaching staff. At the same time, the researchers conducted observations in the SSEUs as well as in the mainstream classes which special needs students sometimes attended. These observations were recorded using templates. Interviews were also conducted with the general teaching staff, the carers of the children with special needs, the headmaster or headmistress, the assistant heads, the liaison officer and the educational psychologist of the school.

## VIII. Results

Using the aforementioned methodology, several findings regarding the role of the STEDC in promoting inclusive education for pupils attending SSEU emerged. Firstly, it seems that decisions regarding

placing a child in an SSEU can be made arbitrarily. In many cases, it appears that pupils who are enrolled in secondary education are placed and then removed from the SSEU, without adherence to the relevant regulations and the legislation governing the operation of special education in general. Examining the results, we have collected from the two schools, we realized that there are two different types of problems associated with STEDC regulation of SSEUs. We include below three indicative scenarios that occurred during our observations:

### A. Example - 1

“Andreas was in his first year of secondary school, following the SSEU curriculum. According to the teachers, he was making good progress in learning and being very sociable. During the regular classes, he actively participated.

A month into the school year, his SSEU and regular class teachers agreed that the SSEU curriculum no longer suited his needs, so they suggested to the school's head to allow Andreas to join the mainstream class full time. The head directly contacted the pupil's parents explaining his own and the teachers' views, ultimately convincing them, despite their concerns, that their son should attend mainstream class.

Despite the reactions, a re-assessment of Andreas's case was conducted, but it took the STEDC four months to respond. After visiting the school, the educational psychologist spoke to the student and his parents, as well as the teachers, and was of the opinion that the student could leave the SSEU for a trial period to attend regular class. The proposal was accepted by the STEDC two months later. It was also decided that he would receive support lessons in parallel. So, we conclude that the STEDC is slow and prone to delays. The four-month wait for a reply regarding the child's education, in our view, is unreasonable”.

Considering the above, it is worth noting that there are no strict criteria as to which students should be kept in or out of the SSEU. In the above scenario, we see that there is an unclear delineation between children who belong in SSEUs and those who could be as well served by studying in the regular classes and being supplemented by support courses. How is it possible for a particular pupil to be in an SSEU at the beginning of the school year and a few months later for this decision to be questioned, resulting in a reversal which will have a strong impact on the development of the child?

On this topic, we had input from the carer of children with special needs who worked at this school:

“I have been doing this job for ten years now and no one has ever answered my biggest question. Based on what criteria are children placed in the unit? In one unit we may have children who cannot even talk, as well as children who can write proper paragraphs and read. These children are in the same group and I think it's unfair for both. For example, in our unit we have two little girls with brain paralysis, you can hardly understand what they are saying and they cannot even hold a pencil. In the same group, we have another two students, one with emotional problems who as I have seen can easily solve grammar exercises. What can I say? Something must be done because I think we are not helping them in here”.

If a child is deemed suitable or unsuitable to attend the Special Unit by the educational psychologist and the tutors, the STEDC tends to agree with those professionals. In our opinion this is not

a good enough evaluation on the part of the STEDC. It would be better if every qualified member of the STEDC separately evaluated the learning level of the child through personal contact with the child. The visit of the educational psychologist to examine the student is a formal and brief process. In this respect, someone may wonder how it is possible for such a meaningful decision regarding a child's progress to be made so simply. We believe that each student's case is not looked at in enough depth.

Therefore, it can be concluded that it is vital to substantively examine each and every SSEU referral case. At the same time, one may question: is it appropriate for children attending SSEUs to attend a set curriculum when they belong to different learning profiles? Why has this been presented as a tailored program?

In order to clarify some of the issues above, the researchers interviewed the Special Education Liaison officer who pointed out the following:

“The District Special Needs Committee has the final say about placing a child in an SSEU, but this committee does not usually know the child personally. The only people in the Committee who may know some things about the performance of the child is the educational psychologist and the liaison officer. Therefore, it only makes sense that the decision to place a child into an SSEU is influenced by the opinions of the educational psychologist and the tutors responsible for teaching that particular child”.

Analyzing the statement above, one may argue that although the members of the STEDC are professionally trained (eg. sociologist, speech therapist, special teacher) and could make a major contribution to the decision on whether to place a child in an SSEU, they lack sufficiently detailed knowledge of each child's situation in order to make the decision in his or her best interests. Of course not knowing the child's personally and relying on other professionals' assessments and opinions does not automatically mean the STEDC are making wrong decisions. Also, the hurried nature of the decisions is probably more to do with the overburdened system, rather than not coming directly in contact with the child.

The same hurried nature of the STEDC decisions seems to be obvious regarding a child's placement in SSEU. The following example shows a case where a student was moved without any formal process being carried out and a description of the lack of skills by regular teachers in dealing with children with behavioral issues.

### **B. Example - 2**

One day in January one of the researchers went to an SSEU class for observation. Sitting beside her was the specialist language teacher, Mr. Giannis, who turned towards Maria, a student, with concern to ask, “Who are you? Why are you not in your class?”. Then the carer told the teacher that they had sent her to the SSEU for a lesson. At the end of the lesson, the carer told Mr. Giannis that Maria had been sent to the SSEU because she was causing trouble in the classroom. In the course of the following month, the student continued to participate in the SSEU's curriculum for two or three periods, a day without any formal procedures having taken place. At the same time, the researchers observing Maria's regular classes, saw her exhibit disruptive behavior, such as getting up from her seat, disturbing the other of the students, taking their belongings, pretending to teach the class, as well as talking to herself. When asked as to the methods used to deal with students like Maria, the teachers simply said they were not

sufficiently trained to know what to do.

The headmaster, with the agreement of Maria's teachers, had come up with the solution of sending her to the SSEU for certain periods during the day. The liaison officer was informed a few days later and was initially opposed to the move. Following a discussion with the school's management, it was decided that the student would take Greek and Maths in a mainstream classroom, but also attend some lessons in the SSEU; The liaison officer finally changed his mind and agreed to the school's management decision, perhaps due to the overwhelming support on the decision by the rest of the teaching staff. The arrangement was to be finalized in an official curriculum for the student. A few days later, the situation changed again. At the sole discretion of the headmaster, and without informing other parties, the student started attending lessons in the SSEU whenever the class teacher deemed that she should not remain in the mainstream class. The result was a back and forth between mainstream classes and the SSEU, which eventually meant her staying in the latter for almost the entire day, but without officially belonging to it. The STEDC didn't play any role during this, due to the fact that the school management didn't refer the situation to them.

The situation had a negative effect on the pupil, who often screamed and swore at regular class teachers when asked to leave the regular class and go to the SSEU. She would refer to other SSEU students in a derogatory manner, saying things like, “I am not a retard like them,” and also “I am a good student, I do not belong there”, along with, “you are all mean” and “I don't know how to do anything and I'm bored here in SSEU”. Nevertheless, the student remained in the Special Unit.

In this case, the STEDC was essentially absent even though it is the competent and responsible body which should be defining whether or not a child should join the SSEU. At this point a question arises: Why were teachers allowed to move pupils around without STEDC approval? Essentially, the STEDC has no presence in the school. It would certainly be desirable to consider the views of the teachers, headmasters, the carers and the parents of the child with special needs, but it is also essential that a thorough and scientific investigation of each case is conducted by the STEDC before the adoption of a decision to place a child into SSEU.

Through a careful consideration of this example, we may conclude that the placement of a child in an SSEU, apart from the fact that it can be carried out without due process being observed, is also very likely to act as a deterrent for the inclusion of children with special needs. Some children, although they may be able to cope in the mainstream class, end up in the SSEU just because of their behavioral problems. The SSEU can be used as both a punishment for a child who does not comply with the regulations of the mainstream class, but also as a method for teachers to, albeit temporarily, get rid of problematic students. It is very likely that some teachers have resorted to such measures given the inability of the school system to put solutions in place to tackle behavioral problems in students. On the other hand, the fact that the special needs educational system finds itself unable to tailor curricula to meet the needs of the special needs students remains problematic. It's the responsibility of the teacher of the SSEU to come up with a tailored program in the SSEU as well as in the mainstream class, as well as make sure not to abuse or take advantage of the special education system.

Additionally, the only STEDC member who was involved in Maria's case, albeit belatedly, was the Liaison Officer. Neither the educational psychologist, the clinical psychologist, the special education teacher nor the social worker evaluated the

case of this particular student as required by the Cyprus Ministry of Education. Regarding this incident, the head of the SSEU mentioned the following:

“I really cannot understand how we have come to such a decision. How can you send away a child from class simply because they are disturbing the lesson? These things cannot be done. Imagine placing all children who are making fuss in the Unit. I completely disagree! We should have found another way to handle school problems. This is a clear violation of the law. In addition, what will the other children think about this girl? We have stigmatized her”.

Surely, the decision-making process, should be informed by the working of the mainstream class as well as in the SSEU class. Moving a pupil from the mainstream class to the SSEU, should be a well thought out movement taking in mind the child disabilities, not his or her behavior. According to a teacher:

“This development has made the children of the mainstream class view the student differently. Instead of a student who disrupts lessons, as she was previously characterized, they have now started seeing her as a student with special needs”.

We see how the teaching staff’s actions towards the pupil led to her marginalization. Additionally, it is apparent that there has been a clear violation of the 1999 law, which states that:

“Every person, particularly each parent, nursery school manager, nursery or primary school or any other member of teaching staff, physician, psychologist, social worker, notifies the District Commission without delay of any knowledge or perception that a child may have special needs”.

### C. Example - 3

Under the current legislation, there are many people who have the right to refer a child for examination by the STEDC. In addition to cases such as Maria’s, above, the unsatisfactory decision-making process can work the other way as well, for example by quickly moving a special needs student over to mainstream classes. One special education liaison officer gave us another example:

Two months ago, a pupil stopped attending the special unit and was included in the mainstream classroom, as an observer. The decision was taken very quickly, within two weeks. But the child was uncontrollable. No one took responsibility for him. The presence of other pupils bothered him. During the lesson in the mainstream class, he couldn’t understand anything.

We understand that parents often wish to see their special needs child included in mainstream education, but this can sometimes lead to the child’s further marginalization. If a child’s parents want him or her to (re)join mainstream education, a process must be followed. For example, for such a pupil, the hours he/she spends in the SSEU could be gradually reduced, along with personalized teaching in the mainstream class. The assistant headmaster said:

“It is possible that the decision we took disregarded the [rules of the] Ministry of Education. But I think our choices were limited. We all know that the application for referral of a child made to the STEDC could be considered two to three years later. Until then, the child would have finished high school and would certainly create even bigger problems in the classroom. The child was moved to the mainstream class two weeks after the request was made. So, they just didn’t wait for a decision. The psychologist who came to see the child did not offer us any meaningful solution”.

This also reveals an issue related to the assessment of pupils regarding their placement in the SSEU. The great delay in the evaluation of cases by the STEDC is one of the biggest obstacles in

addressing the problems faced by students. This creates problems when it comes to putting together groups with children with special needs for the SSEUs. Of course, this issue in no way justifies the action of teachers and the school. At the same time, however, it is a major problem that needs to be resolved immediately. Perhaps what would help things along would be clearer regulations from the Ministry of Education in matters relating to the operation of SSEUs. It would be extremely useful for teachers and parents to have clear SSEU operational guidelines given by the Ministry. Of course, those guidelines should be followed by the STEDC, the teacher and the school administrators.

It seems entirely possible for school management and teachers to take and implement decisions regarding special needs students without the involvement or notification of the members of the STEDC. Therefore, we can conclude that the teachers and the management of a school affect the work of the STEDC, because they intervene in the committee’s work by exceeding their remit of authority in order to take decisions that are legally up to STEDC.

### IX. Conclusion

Analyzing the results of the research we conclude that the STEDC plays an extremely important role in the inclusion or exclusion of pupils of Special Units. On the other hand, the actual decisions of the STEDC are influenced to a large extent by school staff. The findings of the research show that secondary schools can, and do, disregard the legislative measures put in place around special education; schools have shown to be willing to proceed without notifying the STEDC, which is a major issue to address.

Next, a factor affecting the function of STEDC is their heavy workload. The cases of pupils in need of referral have increased sharply in recent years. This causes delays and results in a slow-moving bureaucratic procedure. The Ministry of Education could strengthen the STEDC by assigning more members and creating subcommittees in order to be able to more quickly assess the cases of children referred to them for evaluation. With such an amendment, more children can be assessed, enabling the Ministry of Education to provide the appropriate assistance.

Another key issue seems to be the fact that the STEDC members do not spend sufficient time with each child assessed. Our opinion is in line with the Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of Children (2011), who also believes that the one hour spent by the educational psychologist to evaluate the child is not enough to form an objective assessment. Each member of the committee should have personal contact with the child before reaching a conclusion. It is also obvious from the above considerations, that the actual decisions of the STEDC regarding a child are influenced by the teaching staff, who in some cases remain indifferent to the educational needs of their pupils.

Looking to the future, we feel that it is necessary to implement better criteria as regards the referral of students to the Special Unit or to mainstream education with certain supporting courses. It is necessary to formalize these criteria in collaboration with specialists, such as educational psychologists and specialist teachers.

The 2013 circular related to special education in Cyprus does not provide any kind of effective monitoring over the provision of educational services in the SSEU. The twice-yearly evaluations carried out by SSEU teachers are not in any way scrutinized. These reports must be checked in detail and be subject to year-on-year comparisons in order to assess the progress of each student. In addition, they should be put in context with the STEDC’s own

regular reports.

At the same time, we feel that the role of the STEDC needs to be strengthened also regarding the assessment they carry out. It seems that, on the topic of SSEUs, teaching staff tend to adhere to a predominantly bureaucratic understanding of their obligations, which gradually leads them to ignore their critical responsibilities. It would therefore be desirable to carry out an evaluation of existing SSEUs, in order for the STEDC to be aware of any wrongdoing and omissions associated with their operation. At this point we could take into consideration the case of the UK, which through the NCSE, proposes regular reviews by the school.

Strengthening the role of the STEDC requires cooperation between education professionals. Teachers in the SSEU or in mainstream education dealing with special needs students should consider the advice of the STEDC on a case-by-case basis.

School principals and the school communities in general should cooperate more with the STEDC. The school principal should engage effectively in the process of evaluating pupils of the Special Unit. Biannual reports should be prepared by the teaching staff (under the supervision of the headmaster) and sent to the STEDC with proposals aimed at more effective inclusion of the pupil. The headmaster could be part of the STEDC to have a liaison role.

All relevant parties must cooperate for these efforts to succeed. Given this, we hope to see an increase in the percentage of pupils with special needs included in mainstream classes; we also hope to see the appropriate training and socialization of pupils with special needs in SSEUs.

Other than the usual wariness on the part of the teaching staff, which comes with conducting research of this nature, we also saw defensive attitudes; we surmised this had to do with the teaching staff's concern that we would hold them accountable for marginalizing pupils with special needs. The length of the research helped teachers and school headmasters become accustomed to the researchers' presence. The fact that the participants were essentially colleagues of one of the researchers may have also had a role in eliminating wariness to a certain degree. In addition, some teachers, but especially the school management, found themselves in a difficult position when they realized that the course of action they had followed putting children in and out of the SSEU was not in line with the law. It was also difficult for some of the participants to blame their employer for their actions, i.e. the Ministry, which in this case was represented by the Special Education Liaison Officer and the STEDC.

We hope that this research project will provide some basic guidelines as to how to improve the crucial role of the STEDCs, making them more effective, contributing to the much-needed creation of a school for all, including students with special needs.

Further research is always necessary and improvements should be made. Our recommendations for further research on the topic would be to identify more concrete proposals as to how the STEDC's role could be improved.

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