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# The role of special education teachers in primary schools in Greece

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Over the last 20 years special education teachers have emerged as a distinct but heterogeneous occupational group in Greece. This paper looks at how special education teachers perceive their job and their role. I explore how teachers give meaning to their experiences and how these experiences influence their practice. The different discourses and ambiguities over inclusion, integration and special education indicate the complexity of this area and of teachers' roles. The uncertainty over their role, the tensions with other professionals and the changing policy context and policy shifts create significant inconsistencies. This paper reveals that teachers are part of a network of professionals with contested interests in the field, and that there are numerous controversies and paradoxes in special education in Greek primary schools. I argue that teachers' voices can contribute to the current debate about inclusion, and that it could possibly facilitate a change in the nature of debate in Greece.

## **Introduction: contextualized/spatialized professionals**

Greece has 'low provision' for students labeled with special educational needs and a low number of these students attend schools (OECD, 1999; Vislie, 2003). This is due to the fact that there is a decrease in provision after primary school (Ministry of Education, 2005). There are 1091 units of special education (special schools and integration units) in primary education and only 101 units in secondary education. This decrease is not due to the fact that the students are included in mainstream settings, but rather that the students stay at home.

Children labeled with severe special educational needs may receive no education in public schools but receive a lot of therapy in the private sector. This raises a lot of questions about the aim of education and intervention for these children. The law forbids private centers to provide education because education is deemed as a free right for all and the centers provide expensive therapies. However, the state subsidizes these therapies. The Ministry of Health and Social Services gives some funding to the parents

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of children labeled with special educational needs. Parents pay this money to the professionals in the medical and quasi-medical markets (speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists) for the afternoon sessions/therapies which their children attend. Despite what happens in other countries such as the UK, where the state gives some funding to the special school units the children attend, in Greece the state gives the funds to the parents. The reason for this may be that parents can decide about the best kind of professional help provided privately and run in the afternoons after school. Parents cannot choose the school because all children attend the neighborhood school. The hidden implication is that morning public special school units (special schools and integration units) are not seen as places where 'proper' special education services can be delivered. The moment the Ministry of Education tries to escape the medical model of disability, the Ministry of Health perpetuates this same model and the prosperous market of the medical and quasi-medical professionals. The Ministry of Health, instead of distributing the money to schools, distributes it to individual medical and quasi-medical professionals who become richer. However, the Ministry of Education is not entirely innocent since the special educational staff that could deliver therapies and work competitively with the private sector is very limited. The public special education teachers provide education to children as a free right, whereas the private para-medical professionals provide therapeutic sessions as a privilege.

### **Placing special education teachers within professional networks**

Special education teachers of primary education in Greece are a heterogeneous group. They are primary teachers who started their career as mainstream teachers and moved into special education without a planned or systematic route. Nowadays, the majority of them (80%) have a diploma of a two-year in-service-teacher training programme on special education; some of them (8%) have a masters or Ph.D. degree in the field; and the rest (12%) have no extra qualification but their experience in the special education settings. Special education teachers developed as a distinct professional group mainly after 1985 when a law defined their entry qualifications to the job and also initiated the creation of public special schools and special education classes which were renamed integration units in 2000. Special education teachers are a minority in the mainstream teaching profession and a vast majority in the field of special education.

There is a lot of controversy concerning how mainstream teachers and other professionals view special education teachers. Initially in the mid-1980s special education teachers appeared as a new occupational group in Greece when mainstream teachers decided that they were not properly trained to teach children labeled with special educational needs. Mainstream teachers thought that they would benefit if 'difficult to teach' children were someone else's responsibility and were taught 'somewhere else'. On the other hand, as years went by and special education teachers became qualified by studying the two-year in-service training or completing postgraduate studies, their label of 'special' became a label of 'expertism' and they became 'specialists' in the field. They appeared to have some specialization that other mainstream teachers did not have. Within 20 years, the way special education teachers were perceived

changed from 'missionaries' (Kitsaras, 1994) to 'open-minded' and 'distinguished' (Zoniou-Sideri, 1997, p. 256). However, the above descriptions seem to be generalizations or wishful thinking that need to be examined more closely.

Liaison or collaboration with other professionals is part of the role of the teacher and there is no training for this. An integration unit teacher cooperates with the mainstream teachers of the school since there are no psychologists for mainstream schools. A special school teacher cooperates with other school teachers and the special educational staff (psychologists, social workers). Collaboration among professionals, however, tends to be ad hoc, partial and temporary in nature in the British context (Harris, 2003). Issues around power are crucial to institutions and interprofessional relations. In the Greek context, power relations are revealed sometimes as personal relations/professional status relations (Boutskou, 2006). Who has the power to decide what is best for the children of a mainstream school? The mainstream or the special education teacher? Which professional is more qualified to decide about the best practice for children at a special school? The psychologist or the teacher? Usually each professional group listens to each other's opinion and what happens is that there is a consensus and a compromise between both sides in order to keep the balance, acknowledge the other's involvement and justify their existence.

There is some tension between teachers and educational psychologists reported in the British literature. Educational psychologists raise strong feelings because the mystique which surrounds their work is often an irritant if time is not spent to explain or indicate possible coping strategies for children's difficulties (Garner *et al.*, 1997). Many teachers talk about the educational psychologists' failure to produce a major contribution to educational practice, since they are quite absorbed with the technicalities of tests and pay too little attention to what is actually happening to the children on whom the tests are conducted (Leyden, cited in Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). Educational psychologists were deemed as scientific philanthropists who hand out their knowledge and skills to teachers deemed as practitioners and technicians (Swan, cited in Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). Within the Greek context things are quite confusing because educational psychologists who work in the public schools are very few and most of them work at special schools. Many teachers feel that their role is threatened by educational psychologists (Nikolopoulou & Oakland, 1990). Teachers at public schools also think that educational psychologists are necessary at mainstream schools, but only when teachers ask for their help (Poulou, 2002). However, the myth of advising teachers may enhance the status of the educational psychologists.

Within the network of professionals and quasi-professionals, special education teachers have been considered a low-status occupational group who do not have any expertise. The role of special education teachers has been devalued by giving importance to therapeutic interventions rather than education.

### **The role of the special education teacher in Greece**

The role of the special education teacher is not clearly defined in legislation and seems to be quite broad and diverse. Their role is not only to train and educate pupils

labeled with special needs at school but also to diagnose and tackle the special needs in cooperation with parents, the other teachers of the school, the other professionals, and to organize lectures to make people aware of special needs (Xanthopoulos & Sakkas, 1997). These responsibilities are vague and overlap with the responsibilities of other disciplines. This creates tensions between the professionals and confusion as to what is really going on in different schools and contexts.

A review of the limited Greek literature shows that the role of the special education teacher is constantly changing depending on the contexts. Initially in the 1980s the special education teacher was deemed as a person who was confronting many difficulties and problems. He/she usually had to take decisions that were based on ethical–emotional assessments. The special education teacher was undoubtedly the irreplaceable servant of special education (Kalatzis, 1976). In the 1990s teachers were strongly criticized by researchers because they did not have any special training. In 1983 91% of teaching staff in special schools/classes had no special training. The lack of training led to a feeling of dissatisfaction and insecurity, and they were also blamed for the ‘immature, unscientific, and low level education they offer’ (Barbas, 1983, p. 35). In order to enhance their sense of professionalism and professionalization they attended courses in special education (Ministry of Education, 2005). According to Zoniou-Sideri (1996) their diverse role is to balance the ethical and legitimate with the pedagogically correct in an effective way so that the child can develop his/her abilities.

In integration units and mainstream schools the majority of children (56%) identified with special educational needs are children with learning difficulties. The label of learning difficulties is quite confusing in Greece. Sometimes, even in official papers, the term includes specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) and sometimes it includes students who have some difficulties but do not have statements. The prevalence of the label of ‘learning difficulties’ raises some concerns about the specific professional identity for the special education teachers who may be inflexible or negative to the inclusion of students with severe or profound disabilities. Studies about teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion raise questions about the hierarchy of special needs (Cole, 2004; Sideri *et al.*, 2005; Zoniou-Sideri, 2005). There are some special needs which are deemed as more acceptable for a mainstream school and some others that are not.

## Research

I interviewed six teachers from different types of special education schooling (special schools and integration units) because there is a dynamic interplay between person and context (Butt *et al.*, 1992; Measor & Sikes, 1992). The choice of school context was purposive but the choice of teachers was opportunistic, at random (Erben, 1998).

I interviewed three teachers from special schools with different types of special education needs in each of the following: school for the blind, school for children with motor difficulties, and school for children with severe learning difficulties (I was not able to interview a teacher from the school for the deaf). I also interviewed three teachers from integration units at mainstream schools in each of the following areas: integration units situated in a rural area; units located in an area with low socio-economic

status; and those in a high socio-economic status area (Boutskou, 2006). The initial research was based on a life history approach; in this paper I intend to draw out some of the issues that arose from the teachers' interviews.

The special education teachers who took part had a working experience of between 5 and 17 years (Table 1). Spradley (1979 cited in Plummer, 1983) claims that a good informant should be someone who is fully aware and involved in the particular culture. I think that working for five years in special education is adequate time to have many experiences that help one build his/her theory and attitude towards special education and difference (Erben, 1998).

### How teachers became involved with special education

The teachers I interviewed decided to become teachers because they had an idea about what it means to be a teacher based on their observation and own experiences as students from their own teachers during their childhood (Lortie, 1975). Not one of these teachers had planned from the beginning of their studies to become special education teachers. All of these teachers took some risks when they entered special education because they would be teaching in ways that they themselves had not been taught. It was a challenge for them to teach pupils whom they had never had as classmates when they had been at school. They had no reference criterion, because they had never heard anything about the job.

The six teachers I interviewed had very different experiences of special education teaching. Mary and Kate had the experience of just one school context. Michael worked at a special school and a special class and used the experience as a means to climb up the professional ladder. Leo worked at two special schools and two special education classes/integration units and was an inclusion teacher. Both John and Ann spent many years in special education at the same school. Ann was teaching different grades over the years. John worked as a teacher and was also the school vice head.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Teacher characteristics	SCHOOL CONTEXT					
	Special School			Integration Unit		
	Blind	Motor difficulties	Severe difficulties	In high status area	In rural status area	In low status area
<b>Name*</b>	Ann	Kate	John	Mary	Michael	Leo
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male
<b>Age</b>	40	38	51	46	40	45
<b>Years of Mainstream experience</b>	0	10	7	17	8	8
<b>Years of Special Education experience</b>	15	7	16	5	9	14
<b>Total year experience</b>	15	17	23	22	17	22

\* Pseudonyms have been used.

Although it is not stated, it is implied that there is an untold hierarchy of positions; special schools are the most difficult places to teach because of the severity of needs. Transfer into a special class of children with the label of mild difficulties is regarded as horizontal mobility by teachers. However, what is interesting is the fact that, as Leo and Mary said, a special school with children labeled with mild needs is a better place to work than a special class/integration unit in terms of working conditions (fewer working hours, fewer disagreements with parents and colleagues). From this perspective, special education teaching is perceived in a dual way—in a teaching perspective meaning teaching specific students within the classroom, and in a working perspective meaning working with other people within a school context. Teachers' professional development is influenced by both facets of the job. Special education teachers are labor workers who face the changing nature of working conditions at schools and the existence of forces that influence and fragment their work (Lawn & Ozga, 1988). The relation with the school heads and colleagues as well as the parents of the children with or without the label of special needs influences the way they teach and the way they interpret their role. The fact that they are civil workers of a centralized educational system makes them feel that they are insignificant to the system and unable to create changes.

### Conceptualizing special educational needs and disability

Children's educational needs can be seen in different ways by different members of the same profession; how children change over time is viewed differently by different teachers. How teachers view children is the other side of the coin of how teachers see their role. All of the teachers, no matter if they worked at a special school, or an integration unit, described their relation with children in terms of '*advocacy and child protection*' discourse where the teachers act as an advocate in support of the children. For example:

A teacher should love and care for the child. (Mary)

The teacher stays with the child many hours every day. He [sic] knows best what is good for the child. (Michael)

I feel that I have to help them. (Ann)

I will go and help those parents who have accepted the problem of their child. (Leo)

This is the moral dimension of the job that is taken for granted. This presumes a great deal of power over the children, because teachers think they know best what is good for the child. However, special education teachers raised questions and doubts about whether other professionals and colleagues act for the benefit of the children. The teachers used different discourses although each is not mutually exclusive and some teachers used more than one discourse. The dominant ones were:

The *doctor-client discourse*—where the teacher is seen as a specialist who makes an assessment of the problem and provides special intervention.



When you work at a special school you are a therapist. (Michael)

You follow a program according to a child's mental age. (John)

A mainstream school fulfils 90% of the child's needs at the best. Here [at the School for the Blind] we can achieve 99%. (Ann)

We are not doctors to give pills or do an injection and make children relaxed ... but we try to alleviate the problem. (Mary)

This discourse claims that there is an individual deficit within the child pathology which requires individualistic programs tailored to the needs of the children. Intervention strategy depends on the type and category of need and therapeutic sessions rather than education lessons that are provided. This discourse can be seen to legitimize the expertise of the special education teachers.

The *consultancy discourse*—where the teacher provides advice and intervention rather than treatment to the children. Recipients are not only children but parents and mainstream teachers. Children labeled with special educational needs are seen as members of a broader category of difficult and different children who have rights.

They [blind students] have the same problem with me and I do not feel that I am their teacher but a friend ... I want children to become strong so that they can be able to manage not only in their job but in other aspects of their life as well. (Ann)

I teach them and I do not think that they have a deficit or a problem ... I try to make children have good times in the classroom so that they can learn some things. (Kate)

It was interesting to try to balance the situation in the classroom although you knew that outside school things were not balanced. (Michael)

According to this discourse, disability is only a facet of otherness. This discourse can be seen to be related to the changing role of the special education teachers as facilitators of acceptance. Not only education but a social service is provided by the teacher.

The *bureaucratic discourse*—where special education is seen as a policy issue that requires a policy solution. The special educational system is viewed as a bureaucratic response to the needs of different people involved (Armstrong, 1999) namely children, parents, and teachers.

Special schooling should be expanded ... parents should have support at any level ... at special schools there should be people working only with the recovery and feedback of teachers. (Michael)

More integration units should be established and incompatibility of cases should be examined. (Mary)

There is a network of professionals dealing with the needs of the different people whose power and expertise are unquestioned by society. The expansion of special schooling is seen as extending educational opportunities for children. This discourse creates and legitimates a systematic network of professionals, and teachers become a part of it.



## Conceptualizing inclusion

Inclusion is a vague term with many interpretations for different people in different contexts. In Greece, inclusion was imported from abroad without really emerging as a necessity after much dialogue and discussion within the country. There was no agreement in definition and no common practice among teachers. As a consequence special education teachers think of it as the new modern term of special education and they accept it as automatically good. Inclusion seems to be an issue that affects integration unit teachers rather than special school teachers. It is interesting that integration unit teachers viewed themselves as mediators of inclusion and as the core of inclusion. Special school teachers thought of inclusion as something distant that may happen elsewhere and affect other people. Also, inclusion has different facets dependent on the type and level of disability. Inclusion for children labeled with severe disabilities was thought to be the attendance of a special school. Inclusion for children labeled with mild difficulties was seen as attendance of the neighborhood school with the help of the special education teacher. Inclusion was also deemed the attendance of the mainstream class with no extra help.

Teachers talked about their effort to include the children and not about people's full inclusion in society. However, even at a theoretical level the teachers who took part in this work did not agree that all the children can be and should be included in the mainstream classroom. Children labeled with emotional and behavioral problems as well as communication problems were the ones that were thought to be unfit for the mainstream school. The reasons were to do with the child's development, class discipline, and progress. Cole (2004) argues that there are claims that there are hierarchies of inclusion for different types of needs. For example, parents of children with disabilities who are teachers themselves report their experiences and the fact that some children with some types of special needs seem to be more welcome in mainstream settings than others.

The way inclusion is practiced and interpreted was different at different schools. However, there were certain prerequisites that were used. There was a selection about who should be included; the severity and type of need. The process of inclusion is seen basically as an individualistic procedure. The possibility of school change was not an issue. It was a struggle between the child, the special education teacher and the mainstream teacher. It was not deemed as a whole school matter. Inclusion was defined firstly as the locational co-existence of children with their peers, secondly as social exchange with schoolmates, and thirdly as access to the curriculum. It did not mean a reconsideration of the school system; the school structure functions in order to provide broader educational opportunities. Inclusion was seen as an acceptance of the children to be among peers in mainstream classrooms. It was not acceptance of the responsibility of all the children and not participation of all in a differentiated curriculum. This creates or implies low expectations for academic achievement for some children labeled with special educational needs.

There are many paradoxes and contradictions concerning inclusion in the specific contexts. There is a controversy between what teachers believe about inclusion and

what they really do in their everyday practice. Although Michael claims that he is fascinated by the social inclusion of all at a macro level, it seems that he works less towards inclusion of children at a micro level at his school. Although his life is around issues of difference and disability he seems not to implement inclusion at his school because of limited time and the nature of relationship with colleagues.

Inclusion as a social need or reality is something that fascinates me in the sense that differentiation of the individual should be accepted and should be given the opportunity to express their view. ... I do not have the time to do this [try to include] for all the children ... it is a matter of personality, there are people [colleagues] with whom you have good relations and they open their classroom easily and you have better cooperation. (Michael)

On the contrary Leo, who was reserved about the idea of inclusion, works as an 'inclusion teacher'. He enters mainstream class with the three blind children and he helps them during the lesson and adapts the curriculum to their needs.

Although the idea of inclusion is good for the educable children, children with severe special needs are not benefited ... these children are a burden to mainstream school and others. (Leo)

These facts suggest that inclusion practices depend not only on the integration unit teacher but the school context and ethos as well.

Another paradox is that the integration unit seems to work as an exclusionary rather than inclusionary place in terms of children's withdrawal. If inclusion has the sense of not creating boundaries between the child and their peers, a child's withdrawal might mean negative discrimination. When mainstream teachers doubt the efficacy of the integration unit teacher, they do not send their students to the integration unit. So there is no discrimination and exclusion deriving from withdrawal. On the other hand, when the mainstream teachers accept the efficacy of the integration unit teacher they withdraw the children and thus exclude them. This fact reveals that when mainstream teachers are confident, they take responsibility of the children. Discrimination happening within mainstream schools may be limited to special schools. Institutions and foundations that host special schools run as businesses and are concerned with increasing their income, and in the attempt to do so, they accept almost everyone. They are not selective in the type and severity of disability. There is no discrimination concerning the children who are accepted at school.

In Greece statements are used as a means of: (a) allocation of money for private afternoon lessons; and (b) attendance at a public morning special unit (special school or integration unit). Parents need the statement to get the money to pay for the private afternoon sessions but do not want their children to be labeled and stigmatized in school. Quasi-medical professionals who work in private need the statement to get parents' money and have clients. Teachers need the statement to have pupils to work with and maintain their secure post at school. So this cycle is maintained and reproduced all the time. However, there is a difference between the public teacher and the private professional. Teachers are paid the same money bonus by the State, which is irrelevant of the number of pupils and types of needs. This fact possibly makes teachers want few children with mild difficulties and they may end up being selective in the

way they accept pupils. Although teachers should accept any child into their classroom according to the law, there might be a dispute between the mainstream and the special education teacher of the school about how many hours the child should be withdrawn at an integration unit. Producing or reproducing hierarchies of difficulties is a disabling process.

### **The dimensions of the teacher's role in special education**

In British literature there is constant conflict about whether or not special education teachers are seen as 'proper' teachers or 'support' teachers (Farrell & Ballshaw, 2002). In Greece, all special education teachers used to be mainstream teachers. There are no support teachers at school and the dilemma is whether the special education teacher is something different to a mainstream teacher; whether they are specialists or therapists. This has implications for the identity of the children as pupils or patients and vice versa.

The teacher's role depends on the context in which they work and the severity of the children's difficulties. If teachers work at a special school they are seen as therapists. Their role is compared to that of the psychologist. If the teacher works at an integration unit they are deemed to be a specialist and their role is compared to the mainstream teacher.

I could not compare the special and mainstream education, they are two different things ... when you work at a special school, you are a therapist, not a teacher because what you do is the cure of the soul ... the special class teacher is isolated from the rest of the teachers because he is considered to do something different, he is not a teacher, he is a specialist.  
(Michael)

The integration unit teacher's role is limited to academic skills of literacy and numeracy for children with learning difficulties. As far as children with obvious disabilities are concerned, the integration unit teacher's role is shifted into acceptance of disability from the school. The special school teacher is perceived as teaching the basics (literacy and maths) and thus doing something different than psychologists. The integration unit teacher is perceived as caring for and nurturing the child on an individual basis, something different from the classroom teaching of mainstream teachers. The element of difference is inherent in both contexts and creates boundaries between the professionals.

The role of special education teachers is vague and makes them feel uncertain because their role is dependent on three domains. The first domain is knowledge and experience, the second one is moral and political implications of the job, and the third one is autonomy and status. Teachers think that their training should be updated to the latest theories and offer them adequate field experiences. Teachers also highlight the importance of their small decisions in their everyday practice, which affect children's and parents' lives. Teachers as professionals think that they should draw the line between the other professionals who work competitively in the field in the private or public sector.

We, teachers and the psychologists or the social servants see things from different angles ... use different terminology. (Michael)

Special education teachers feel vulnerable because the diversity of the special needs and the uniqueness of each child make them feel that they are learning all the time. It is not only knowledge but experience that makes them feel competent. Teachers learn to teach by experience.

My experience from the rural school was helpful. (Mary)

The first year was difficult but the second year things were better. (John)

Teaching is not a collection of technical skills, a package of procedures, and a bunch of things one can learn and apply. While the above are important there is much more to teaching than this. Teachers become the teachers they are not just out of habit; teaching is bound to the lives they lead. Teaching styles are not the outcome of pedagogic choice but a response to environmental circumstances and personal values. The fact that personal experience is institutionalized and important implies the subjectivity of the profession and the acceptance that there is no universal and objective knowledge transmitted to the special education teachers as may happen with other professions.

The teachers I interviewed were silent or gave limited details about their training. Although training was the prerequisite for their posts, teachers did not mention a lot about it. Some were satisfied by it (Mary, Kate) because their special training justifies their expertise over their job. Some others are dissatisfied (John, Leo) because their training was in the form of knowledge packaged courses—both in-service training and seminars—that were alien to the purposes and contexts of teachers' work (Little, 1987). Teachers underlined how significant the school visits were. Their training did not acknowledge and address the personal identities, moral purposes of teachers and contexts (Hultman & Horberg, cited in Hargreaves, 1995). They failed to connect the moral purposes and emotional commitments as part of the profession. The moral dimensions of teaching are lost, forgotten or simply taken for granted (Fenstermacher, 1990). Special education teachers recall:

Qualifications are not enough ... a teacher first and foremost should love and care for the child ... you should express yourself more and create a nice atmosphere in the class. (Mary)

If you do not like the child, you cannot help him. (John)

Teaching is much more emotional than being an expert in a subject or competent in techniques. Teaching is a 'moral craft' (Tom, 1984) because of the small but numerous and significant judgments they make in their everyday interactions with children, parents, colleagues and agencies and the moral consequences of the job. Even though policy and professional rhetoric stresses knowledge and technique as central to good teaching, the special education teachers I interviewed drew attention to emotion, desire and passion.

It is a job that you never do the same thing every day. You should have ardent desire, long for this job. (Ann)

Although all the special education teachers identified the moral implications of the job, only some identified the political implications. Moral purposes of teaching are

also a political issue in a post-modern world where the personal and the political blur (Denzin, 1992). Teaching is political in the sense that who should or should not be included, what to include or exclude from the curriculum and how to connect with pupils' lives (Bigelow, 1990) are political decisions. The teacher is an educational worker and a political actor too (Carlson, 1987 ; Stevens, 1987).

Teachers who seem to care more about their students (Kate, Mary) see educational politics as irrelevant to their own classroom teaching (Bennett, 1985).

The Government may show some interest, money is spent but if I examine how it affects my job, I feel that no, not at all. (Kate)

Politics is seen as tainted and teaching is seen as pure. Politics has no meaning or obvious benefits for their work. However, politics is about power and power relations that exist in schools and classrooms (Blasé, 1988). Being political means being critical, reflective about one's work, context, social conditions and consequences (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Being more political means learning about the micro-politics of school, developing the capacity to discern power relations. Being politically aware helps them to enable and assist students in reaching the levels of their potential. Being political means not avoiding human conflict because conflict is the prerequisite for change (Lieberman *et al.*, 1991).

Although special education teachers experience great autonomy over their classroom and work, they do not feel that their status is increased. Autonomy is the criterion that helps distinguish professional from proletarian work. However, not all teachers seem to understand it. Some special education teachers enjoy great autonomy over the curriculum and decision making and celebrate this freedom (Kate). On the other hand, the fact that there is no prescribed curriculum is seen more as a disadvantage rather than an opportunity to be creative and flexible (Leo).

Although money bonuses and small student numbers are elements of high status among teachers, special education teachers feel that they are not given the recognition and respect they deserve. They feel that they are insignificant to the system, but significant to children's lives. Special education teachers define their own professionalism as service, not as a business or a researcher. Teaching is also a work and a labor process connected with bureaucrats and State employees.

### **Concluding thoughts and implications of my research**

This research is not intended to be an evaluation of special education teachers in Greece, but rather an attempt to raise important issues for practitioners and researchers. My intention is not to try to stereotype the special education teacher, but to raise the issues, dilemmas and problems that they face in specific contexts at this particular time.

Special education teachers are important people in the process of inclusion and exclusion of children. Despite their intentions for inclusion, they may maintain and create exclusion. Even the word 'special' may be a disabling process; even their existence is a disabling process. On the other hand, the existence of integration unit teachers in mainstream schools may be a chance to change people's attitudes towards difference

and difficulty. Even the smallest decisions teachers make about a child have ideological, moral and political implications and certainly affect the child. Teaching is seen as a political and moral act and not only as knowledge transmission. Under this perspective teachers are political actors in the sense that they apply or distort the legislation, they have an impact on children and their families. I view them as directors and initiators of change happening in schools. Special education teachers are the means through which the issues of rights, participation and democracy may be enacted in schools.

Change in schools can only happen when research, reflection and critical engagement with ideas and practices become part of the teacher's role. Only then can teachers be seen as knowledge-producers and active agents of schools, and not passive instruments of Government policy (Armstrong & Moore, 2004). The well-known saying about the environment, 'think globally, act locally', can be applied to education as well. Only then can theory be linked to practice. Practice can lead to generation of theory, which in turn can be tested in practice. This never-ending cycle is the cycle of change that happens as a reasonable process and is not imposed by outsiders.

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