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The implementation of a collaborative action research programme for developing inclusive practices: social learning in small internal networks

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The implementation of a collaborative action research programme for developing inclusive practices: social learning in small internal networks

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The idea of inclusive education has featured very highly in the educational priorities of many educational systems. However, the same educational systems are very often criticised because of the difficulties of their teachers to respond to inclusive environments of learning, where all children, despite their abilities, receive equal opportunities in teaching and learning. In this study, we implement a programme of collaborative action research with the purpose of investigating the degree to which it could contribute to the development of inclusive practices. The research reported here took place in a primary school classroom in Cyprus. Our findings from this research shed further light on the nature of differentiation in the preparation and teaching of teachers in relation to inclusive education as well as on the role of teachers as leaders in this process. The collaborative process was successful because it supported experimentation and reflection and provided to all involved opportunities to consider new possibilities. Our experience from this process suggests that if we are interested in developing such practices we cannot follow simple formulas. Rather what we need is a system of social learning within the workplace that builds on existing conditions. Inclusive practices in Cyprus schools, then, should not be approached as simplistic recipes or trite formulas but as social learning that will be developed in small networks and communities of practice.

Keywords: collaborative action research; collaborative inquiry; inclusive education; inclusive practices; Cyprus education

Introduction

The idea of inclusive education has featured very highly in the educational priorities of many educational systems. However, the same educational systems are very often criticised because of the difficulties of their teachers to respond to inclusive environments of learning, where all children, despite their abilities, receive equal opportunities in teaching and learning (e.g., Booth and Ainscow 1998). The educational system of Cyprus is in a similar situation. The findings of different researchers have shown that teachers confront difficulties in their efforts to develop inclusive practices (e.g., Angelides 2004; Georgiou 2006). The UNESCO report (1997) concludes similarly, criticising the educational system of Cyprus regarding teaching in mixed ability groups. In the Cyprus educational system there are efforts to develop more inclusive practices but the results are not encouraging. The main method followed is that of seminars for teachers that take place outside schools where they are offered method recipes which are supposed to bring about the desired change.

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We believe that this method is problematic and for this reason, in this study, we implement a collaborative action research (CAR) programme in order to investigate the degree to which it could contribute to the development of inclusive practices. With the term CAR we mean that research process where teachers work in collaboration for the whole process of research (initial design, data collection and analysis, conclusions, implementation of practices that arise from conclusions) for the purpose of improving their practice (see Whyte 1991; Reason and Bradbury 2001; see also Howes et al. 2004). This process seeks to 'bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, the pursuit of practical solutions …' (Reason and Bradbury 2001, 1). More specifically in this paper we are going to try to answer the following questions:

- How far can collaborative action research help in the development of inclusive practices?
- In what ways could collaborative action research be implemented in order to explore that question?
- How could collaborative action research be used in order to bring about improvement in the inclusive practices of teachers and the school?

In what follows, we first discuss the term of inclusive education and then we develop the methodology we used. After that, we present the analysis of our data, we discuss the themes that emerged from this analysis and we substantiate them with data. Finally, we consider the implications of the implementation of CAR for the development of inclusive education.

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Inclusive education

Over the last few years there has been considerable debate regarding the ways in which the different educational systems in the world should decrease marginalisation and develop more inclusive practices in their schools. One important aspect of this discussion revolves around the question of what schools can do to become more inclusive, in terms of maximising the participation of all children in their cultures, curricula and communities (see Dyson, Howes, and Roberts 2002). The international literature and research describes the efforts for transforming the existing arrangements in schools in such a way as to enable these schools to respond efficiently to all students (e.g., Ainscow 1997; Clark et al. 1999). There is also interest regarding the ways in which they should respond to children that are marginalised or even excluded.

The issue of inclusive education is considered to be crucial and many researchers recommend ways and techniques for the development of more inclusive practices. They spot barriers that prevent the development of those practices or present factors that lead to marginalisation and generally boost the discussion around the issue of equal opportunities in education (e.g., Armstrong, Armstrong, and Barton 2000; Benjamin 2002; Tilstone, Florian, and Rose 1998). With the term 'inclusive practices' we mean, for example, that the lessons correspond to the diversity of students, all students have access to them, teachers plan, teach and assess their lessons in collaboration, teachers are interested and support the participation and learning of all students, parents and the community are used as a source of support in the classroom, etc. However, we recognise that this is a debateable position and would point to Avramidis and Norwich (2002) for an interesting discussion on the issue, demonstrating that there are stakeholders who consider inclusion to be a negative development. In addition, the 'inclusive movement' has created tension and sometimes contradictions, where some schools try to 'get rid' of students who experience difficulties

in learning, or in order to educate them they ask for more money (see Bines 1995; Gold, Bowe, and Ball 1993; Hornby 1999; Pijl, Pijl, and van de Bos 1999; Rouse and Florian 1997; Wilson 1999).

Collaborative action research was used and brought positive results in environments where teachers aimed at the development of more inclusive practices (e.g., England and Brown 2001) and where inclusion was a goal of the school (e.g., Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2004; Ainscow et al. 2003; Howes et al. 2004). It has also brought positive results in environments where teachers were interested in their own education and development (e.g., James 2006; Peters 2004).

Research design

The purpose of this research was to study the degree to which CAR could contribute to the effort of developing inclusive practices. We were three researchers in the research team. The first researcher (Renos) was a teacher and was the coordinator of the research. The second researcher (Panayiotis) was an academic specialising in inclusive education. This researcher was given the role of the critical friend. Panayiotis's role was mainly to work with the school over time and assist the process of CAR, bringing to the task experience from other schools and other approaches. Furthermore, he asked provocative questions and helped teachers to investigate their practice through another lens. The third researcher (Kyriaki) was the teacher in the class in which CAR was implemented. Renos worked collaboratively with Kyriaki in an action research programme and Panayiotis collaborated with them regularly. We had meetings where we reviewed the development of the research. The research lasted for 16 weeks and during this period of time we all kept a research diary (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

At the initial stage we met together and designed the research and our way of working. We discussed in depth the meaning of the term 'inclusive education' and the different meanings it can be given. Kyriaki was not very familiar with the term, so the first few meetings were used to clarify definitions.

The school was a village primary school in the Famagusta district with 164 students and 16 teachers. In the school there were a number of international students. The third class, in which the CAR was implemented, had 17 students.

To begin with Renos observed Kyriaki for a week in order to familiarise himself with the class and the ways Kyriaki taught and then they began to work collaboratively for the purpose of developing more inclusive practices. All lessons were planned in collaboration. They were actually 'study lessons' which had a double purpose: data collection and implementation of CAR (Ainscow 2005). At the end of the lessons we met and discussed, analysed and considered the data of the 'study lessons' and thus the next activity was prepared. Parts of those meetings were the open reflective discussions. In every meeting we went back to our reflective journals in order to spot and discuss activities, practices or results that looked to be problematic and in need of further analysis. At the same time we tried to point to the activities that seemed to constitute progress in the effort to provide more inclusive education.

Throughout the different reflective activities the effort was mainly to answer the question 'how can I improve my educational practice?' (see Whitehead 1989). For this purpose we attempted to locate possible problems and difficulties that took place during, but also after the end of, teaching (Yaffe 2003). These processes helped towards the better planning of the lessons that followed and in connection with the effort for reflection in action to enable us to develop more inclusive practices. The basic aim for us was to be encouraged to reflect on our practices in order to empower our reflection in action (Schön 1983).

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Data collection

Renos became a participant observer in Kyriaki's class where he observed and took notes on whatever happened during teaching which he considered to be related to inclusive education. In parallel, he wrote down his thoughts and reflections regarding the behaviour and action of Kyriaki and her students during lessons (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2003; Creswell 2003).

During the process of data collection Renos made a series of interviews with Kyriaki. In some of the interviews he used vignettes that were taken from his participant observation (see Angelides, Leigh, and Gibbs 2004). In some of those interviews Panayiotis was present as a critical friend. All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were member-checked with Kyriaki (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Three lessons were videoed and then watched by all of us and we took notes on our thoughts. Then they were discussed by us in three different meetings. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) point out that with videos we can collect even the facial expressions that are also important data.

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Trustworthiness

Given that we were the only 'tools' of data collection, different techniques were used in order to establish the trustworthiness of the data. Initially two methods of triangulation were used. In the first, we cross-compared our data in order to confirm the different themes arising from the data that came from different research techniques (observation, interviews, documents) (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the second, we examined our data from multiple angles and different perspectives, continually looking for alternative possibilities and different explanations, trying to develop a richer understanding of them (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Data analysis

When analysing the data the six stages suggested by Creswell (2003) were followed. In the first stage the data were organised, and then studied separately according to the method by which they were collected (interview, observation). In the second stage we read our data many times in order to understand them better and in parallel we kept notes about our thoughts. After that, we began examining the data for groups of meanings, themes, assumptions and behaviours and tried to locate how these were connected within a theoretical model (Creswell 2003; Ryan and Bernard 2003). In the third stage the process of analysis continued and the data were divided into categories. Each part was named. In the fourth stage all names were put together in bigger groups in order to become areas of analysis. Finally, in the fifth and sixth stages of analysis, given that the categories for analysis were set and they seemed to be connected to the research questions, we began looking at our data in order to substantiate these categories with raw data. This practice was a collaborative process and we contributed equally in setting the emerging themes as well as the data that were used to substantiate these themes.

Developing inclusive practices

Below we analyse the themes that emerged from our analysis and we substantiate them with data. Of course, these themes were not clear but are overlapping and interrelated. Therefore the separation we did was done in order to help the reader understand our argument. The themes that emerged from our data analysis are the following:

- Differentiation of planning
- Differentiation of teaching
- Teacher as a leader

Below we develop each one of them and we support it with data.

Differentiation of planning

The first theme that emerged from our data was that from the moment that Kyriaki became involved in CAR she began differentiating her planning and, as a result, her teaching. This fact seemed to lead to the organisation of her teaching on the basis of the needs of each student separately. Before the beginning of this research Kyriaki's planning included the writing of her weekly plan with daily goals and activities. After the beginning of CAR she began enriching the diversity of her planning. More specifically, it seemed that her planning was no longer generalised for all children and the activities were not addressing the average student. It was observed that she had become more particular and addressed the diversity of abilities of the students in her class. Discussing this issue with Kyriaki she mentioned the following:

> Until recently I prepared a plan that referred to the average student. In this way I often 'ignored', not on purpose, the 'good' or 'weak' students. Now, I think that my planning addresses each student separately and my aim is to satisfy the need of every student and not to satisfy the average student.

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Furthermore, Kyriaki began to locate students who were marginalised because of her own way of teaching. As she said in one of those reflective discussions, after she observed herself in the video she began to comprehend that some of her students did not receive the opportunities they were supposed to receive because of her own omissions. These omissions were mainly related to issues of planning and organisation of teaching that primarily addressed 'good' students:

> I always had high demands from my students … Sometimes I did easy questions as well, I gave simple exercises but inside me I believed that it was a waste of time for high achievers. I hadn't understood to which degree I ignored some other students … I had to see the video in order to realise how I acted towards certain students.

Realising that her planning was problematic, especially in relation to students who experienced difficulties in learning, she began paying more attention to the issue of planning. During the planning she began taking into account the abilities of each student on the basis of which she organised the different activities. This fact seemed to have a positive impact not only on her but also on her students. She said in particular about this issue:

> I think that over the last few weeks, when I have tried more to take into account every student separately in planning a lesson, I have begun to see positive improvement regarding not only my output but also regarding how much every student responds to the lessons.

Gradually, and as time proceeded with the implementation of CAR, Kyriaki's planning became more detailed and analytic. It included the mediums and methods of teaching, a fact that actually leads us to the second theme that arose from our data.

The issue of planning is a matter that has been highlighted by a number of researchers who dealt with the development of the quality of teaching (e.g., Hopkins et al. 1997). For

instance, Ainscow (1999) states that if we are interested to have schools that are moving towards more inclusive practices, the teachers of schools should develop collaborative planning.

Differentiation of teaching

Kyriaki appeared to be continually searching for alternative and additional teaching methods for each lesson. In some of the meetings we had as a research team we discussed the fact that some children might not participate in the lesson and as a result become marginalised because the methods used might not help them to understand the lessons. Via this discussion we concluded that for the more effective development of inclusive practices it would be better to use a variety of teaching mediums. Thus, we should escape from routine use of the board and pictures, which were the most commonly used mediums, and try to use the best mediums in the best way.

The following vignette supports and reinforces the above argument:

> *The lesson was on writing a letter. In the first part of the lesson, the students were sitting in three groups of five. Kyriaki was discussing words and terms with children which were related to the writing of a letter like post-office, letter, envelope etc. The majority of the students participated in the lesson despite the fact that there were a few students who were off task. One student, for example, was playing with her pencils and another was looking out of the window.*
>
> *In the second part, Kyriaki asked a student to go to the neighbouring classroom in order to bring something. When she returned she was holding a stamped letter addressed to the students of the class. Immediately all the students seemed to be excited. They wanted to know who had sent them the letter. Kyriaki announced that the letter was from a pottery maker whom they would visit. All the students asked her to read the letter. In the discussion that followed the terms 'sender' and 'addressee' were introduced and all students participated actively in the lesson. At the end Kyriaki used the overhead projector for the first time in her teaching in order to remind the students of the basic terms of the lesson.*

In the above vignette it appears that in the first part of the lesson, where Kyriaki taught with the use of the board, some students who usually exhibited low participation seemed to lose their concentration. During the planning of the lesson ways to solve this problem were considered. The solution, as we saw above, came from the differentiation of mode and method. When the instruction had meaning for children they participated more. Moreover, the use of an overhead projector seemed to contribute to maintaining the interest of the students in the lesson.

Over the next few days Kyriaki used the overhead projector in her teaching as an alternative to the board. In one of our discussions she said the following about it:

> It is very good and useful. While I write on it at the same time I can see all students because I do not turn my back to them. Students seem to prefer it to the board … students like to write their answers on slides and use the overhead projector to make their presentations … Many students who were often off task seem to be participating more actively with the use of the projector.

During our meeting we discussed the importance of the differentiation of teaching methods and as an example we used collaborative learning. We concluded that with the use of collaborative learning we can increase the participation of our students. We tried (for the purpose of developing more inclusive practices) to answer such questions as the following (questions come from Booth et al. 2000):

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- Do students willingly share knowledge and skills?
- Do students share responsibility for helping to overcome the difficulties experienced by some students in lessons?
- Is the aim of increasing the learning and participation of students seen as the primary aim of all pastoral and behaviour support staff?

Later Kyriaki began using one of the recommended methods, that of collaborative assembling (for more details about this method see Theophilides and Koutsellini 1997). In this method, students were divided into groups and every student had a theme to study (the themes were the same in all groups). Students with the same theme came together in order to study their theme collaboratively. Thus, new groups were formed in the class. When each theme was studied students returned to their initial groups and each one was responsible for informing the other members of his/her group about the theme he/she had studied. Kyriaki seemed to be very satisfied with the initial results of this method:

> I liked this method. It had good results. Students with higher abilities helped their classmates more than before and they began to understand that their [students with higher abilities] success depended on all the members of a group. Previously the low achieving students seemed to depend on high achievers but with this method they 'acquire power' and all members of a group make their own contribution.

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Furthermore, there were efforts to differentiate the mode of instruction. In the case of children experiencing difficulties with reading, the text was differentiated in order for it to become easier and the type was spaced out. Many parents expressed to Kyriaki their satisfaction with the use of this method because their children were attaining better results in reading.

Many researchers consider the issue of differentiation of teaching to be crucial for the development of inclusive education (e.g., Mastropieri and Scruggs 2000; Salend 2005; Tomlinson and Allan 2001). Tomlinson (1999) notes that the teachers who use differentiation of teaching in their classes provide opportunities to every student to go deeper into learning and to learn as quickly as possible, without considering that all students learn in the same way.

Teacher as a leader

Another theme that emerged from our data was that CAR, in addition to enhancing Kyriaki's planning and teaching, seemed to give her the opportunity to develop her leadership skills. We observed that Kyriaki gradually undertook leadership initiatives and began to act independently and with more self-confidence.

Involvement of parents – initiatives into the classroom

The leadership initiatives undertaken by Kyriaki because of her participation in CAR were related to the involvement of parents in the activities of the school. She began having more communication with parents, she encouraged them to visit the school and from what we observed the visits of parents became more frequent.

When Renos spotted this fact she tried to investigate it further. A discussion with Kyriaki revealed that she did it deliberately and with a particular purpose. Specifically, parents visited Kyriaki after her invitation for the purpose of discussing and co-planning the learning

of their children. In this way, parents were directly involved in the learning of their children. Discussing this issue with her, she pointed out that after her involvement in the CAR project and her exposure to the idea of inclusive education, she considered the contribution of parents to be necessary for the success of the long-term goals she had set for her students and for the development of inclusive education in particular:

> When I began going deeper into the meaning of inclusive education I began thinking that inclusion should include everyone, therefore the parents too. We had been working in class for so long in order to cultivate the notion of team-work and acceptance, having as our purpose the collaboration and learning of all students. If this purpose was not extended beyond the school's workplace I believe that many of our efforts would have been wasted because parents are a crucial factor influencing our work.

We observed Kyriaki actively involving parents in the learning process. For example, in a science lesson about electricity she invited Antonis's father, who was an electrician. He explained to students the dangers of electricity, some ways of protecting oneself from it and finally he helped in the creation of electrical circuits. In a second case, during a mathematics lesson on the topic of cubic capacity she invited four parents who did not have any particular knowledge of the subject. The class was divided into four groups. Each group had empty plastic bottles, empty milk bottles of different cubic capacity and a container with water. In the lesson the students worked collaboratively, with a parent in each group, in order to do predictions and measurements of the cubic capacity of the different bottles. In the class there was a different atmosphere, students seemed to put in their maximum effort and the general impression we got after talking informally with students and parents was that although we cannot say that the lesson was more successful than the lesson that did not involve parents, everyone seemed to support the argument that in this way all involved gain direct knowledge and participate in the process of learning and collaborate for a common aim: the learning of students.

Besides involving parents Kyriaki seemed to undertake leadership initiatives within the school for the purpose of developing more inclusive practices. From the beginning she began to investigate her practice and look for new ideas in previously unexplored sources (literature, articles in academic and professional journals, internet, etc.) in order to increase her knowledge of the subject. Then she began developing collaborations and discussing some of the ideas used in the CAR project (successful or not) with other teachers in the school aiming at developing more inclusive practices. Initially, she began with the teacher who taught a parallel class with her. In an interview she expressed her philosophy on this topic:

> All these ideas we used [in CAR] are very interesting and I feel obliged to promote them to other colleagues. Maria was the first who showed a particular interest to learn. It was very good for me because I understood that our effort did not only influence us and the students, but it indirectly influenced some other colleagues. I believe that in this way and in the long term we can 'positively' influence the other colleagues in order to establish the basis for developing more inclusive practices.

After that, she began to undertake initiatives with other teachers, having in mind a future period when she will have more time for a more systematic effort:

> Before the end of this academic year it would be good to provide information about this issue to as many colleagues as possible. If they implement some of the practices we implemented in the CAR project and they have some of the positive results then in the following year our job

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> will be easier … I understand that our collaboration for this project will end very soon. Through this collaboration I have gained a lot and I want to make sure that after finishing the project I will be ready and able to continue improving my teaching and my school. In particular, however, I am interested in involving other colleagues in this effort in order for us all together to achieve the best possible results for all students.

In recent years many researchers have paid particular attention to the issue of developing leadership roles by teachers in relation to school improvement (e.g., Frost 2003; Muijs and Harris 2007; Katzenmeyer and Moller 2001). When leadership is disseminated and when teachers undertake leadership roles it can lead us to the development of more inclusive education (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006).

Discussion – implications

Coming back to the questions we set at the beginning, it seems that CAR can positively contribute to the development of inclusive education. In the school where it was implemented we saw the teacher involved develop more inclusive practices. More specifically, she began differentiating her planning and her teaching and she began undertaking leadership initiatives which aimed at promoting inclusion. In parallel, Renos, who was also a teacher at the school, pointed out the fact that his involvement in the CAR project in Kyriaki's class had a positive effect on his practice as well. As he stated in an evaluation meeting we had where all three researchers were present, Kyriaki's changes in practice, which seemed to reinforce the efforts of improving equal opportunities for all students, became part of his practice. Many times it happened consciously but at other times it happened unconsciously.

All this new activity began to have an impact on the school as a whole. Despite the fact that this issue had not been studied in depth, it was clear that the rest of the teachers of the school began to show an interest in the project which had been implemented in Kyriaki's class. The collaborative process followed, the meetings held at the school, the visits of Panayiotis, who was an 'outsider' to the school, and generally the whole effort that created a climate of interest in the school for inclusive education made us believe that this effort would not stop after the end of the CAR project. Given that Renos and Kyriaki remained at the school for the following academic year and judging from events at the school up until the writing of this paper, it seems that indeed the movement for developing more inclusive practices continues.

One of the reasons that the collaborative process described above worked so well was that the process supported experimentation and reflection and provided to all involved opportunities to consider new possibilities. When teachers work in collaboration with 'outsiders' their morale goes up and they feel themselves to be better professionals. The teachers involved in the above collaborative project emphasised that they would feel themselves to be better professionals if certain 'outsiders' (school advisors or academics) came to school and worked alongside them in analysing classroom practice.

At the same time, both teachers involved recorded in their reflective journals their fears regarding the time the research took. Given that CAR is more time consuming than traditional methods they were afraid that they might 'waste' the students' teaching time. In addition, they were afraid of having the opposite results to what they were trying to achieve.

Our purpose was to implement CAR in a school in Cyprus in order to see how this sort of research could contribute to the schools that unsuccessfully try to develop inclusive practices. Our experience from this process suggests that if we are interested in developing such

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practices we cannot follow simple formulas. Rather what we need is a system of social learning within the workplace that builds on existing conditions.

Given the existing problems in the educational system of Cyprus as well as the difficulties faced by schools which try to successfully teach mixed ability students we believe that more widespread implementation of CAR in schools with the direct involvement of teachers and with the help of some 'outsiders' (e.g., academics or school advisors) could help the development of more inclusive practices (see Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2004). This process will help schools to develop small internal learning networks which will gradually become communities of learning. With the term 'small internal learning networks' we mean those small groups of people within schools that work together for the purpose of development and improvement.

At the heart of small networks are people working together. Ideas are generated and activities are implemented. Learning is documented and shared to spark new ideas and to begin the cycle over again. However, these processes, Creech and Willard (2001) argue, do not occur automatically. Networks, they contend, can cause frustration and undercut the feelings of mutual admiration and appreciation that may have attracted members in the first place. Joining a network entails a long commitment to collaborative effort. In order for a network to exist at all, Creech and Willard conclude, careful attention must be given to how members will be managed.

Collaborative networks are directly related to communities of practice. Wenger (1998) argues that learning is a social phenomenon and that it is better achieved when there is social participation and in particular when there is participation in communities of practice. Knowledge, for Wenger, is inseparable from practice, and it is integrated into the life of the community of practice where members share values, beliefs, language and the way they do things. Communities of practice are groups of people who share what they know, learn from each other regarding issues of their work and provide a social context for this work. For Wenger (1998), communities of practice develop around things that are important to the people involved. The fact that these communities are organised around a certain area of knowledge and activity, Wenger continues, gives their members a feeling of a common enterprise and identity. In order to function, a community of practice needs to produce and assimilate a common repertoire of ideas, obligations and memories. Moreover, as Wenger points out, the community of practice needs to develop certain resources like tools, routines, vocabulary, and symbols, which carry, in a way, the accumulated knowledge of the community. In other words, the community of practice includes practice. That is, in the community of practice, the ways in which members do or approach something, are common to a significant degree among the members. The members of a community of practice are virtually connected in a collaborative network where they interact, reflect and have common experiences, aimed towards a common purpose.

Inclusive practices in Cyprus schools, then, will not be approached as simplistic recipes or trite formulas but as social learning that will be developed in those small networks and communities of practice. In the long term, and if the different schools are networked together (as has been done in other countries, such as England (Hopkins and Jackson 2002)) they will share good practices and will discuss the different emerging problems.

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