



## INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

### EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: CYPRUS

#### 1. Abstract

The following provision is described based on the full understanding of the criteria listed above. Cyprus is one of the countries that are still struggling to move towards a more inclusive school environment, while practicing inclusion and allowing exclusion from mainstream education. The most recent legal framework for the Education and Training of Children in 1999 allows for the existence of both special units and special schools, and goes into extreme depth in an attempt to describe the assessment procedure of a child's perceived needs. This is an attempt to show the effort that takes place in mainstream schools in order to minimise exclusion and create a more inclusive environment.

The example described below is based in a kindergarten which also has a special unit. The unit operates within the boundaries of the mainstream school. A special unit provides intensive special education to a small number of children in a class (up to eight learners) while maintaining contact with and inclusion in a specific mainstream class within the school. Officially, the mainstream class is the children's registered class and where they are considered to belong.

The example special unit is within a kindergarten in Limassol. Seven children classified as being on the autistic spectrum attend this class, aged from 3–7 years. The children have different autistic spectrum disorders and moderate general learning disabilities. Two of the children's primary school start dates have been deferred for one year.

Two specialist teachers work to support and meet the educational needs of these children: a teacher of special education and a speech therapist who visits the school twice a week. The special education teacher is responsible for developing and implementing the individual educational programmes for each child in the unit, according to the child's perceived individual needs. Two care assistants (escorts) accompany the children and provide care support when needed, during both lesson and break time. Care assistants in Cyprus are recruited to provide care for pupils with significant physical or sensory impairments, children whose behaviour is such that they are considered to be a danger to themselves or to other pupils, children with significant medical needs, or children that need feeding or changing. In the case described here, escort assistance is essential for safety, personal care (feeding and changing) and the inclusion process.

The 1999 Law for the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs and its



various additions and alterations up to 2014, claims to put into effect the constitutional right to education of children with special needs. This Law is the legislative framework which regulates the identification of children with special educational needs and the provision for special education. According to the Law, the State is obliged to provide special equipment and educational materials in order to make the curriculum and school buildings accessible for all. Children attending special classes or special units in mainstream schools follow a differentiated curriculum which is adjusted to suit their particular perceived needs. The specialist teacher is asked to simplify the educational aims and assist each individual child within the special unit to develop skills related to issues of personal care and independence, social skills, literacy and mathematics, to the highest possible extent. The goal is to achieve inclusion and gradually maximise the teaching hours within the mainstream class.

## **2. Inclusive features**

Pre-primary education in Cyprus is mandatory and offered freely to children aged 4 years and 8 months to 5 years and 8 months who attend public kindergartens. Younger children aged 3 years to 4 years and 8 months take up vacant places in public kindergartens and pay low fees – a fixed amount of €42. Fee reduction is given to poor families with four children or more. Priority is given to children with special educational needs, irrespective of age. For other children, selection is made according to criteria concerning children at risk and socio-economic deprivation.

The legal educational framework determines that each child can only be registered at their neighbourhood school. Although there are exceptions to this, mostly related to children classed as having special educational needs, the school is accessible to all children who are entitled to register.

The kindergarten used in this example is situated in the centre of one of the largest towns in Cyprus. Eighty-five children are enrolled in the current school year. It is considered to be one of the largest schools in town. Children are assigned to five classes according to their age. Children aged 4 years and 8 months to 5 years and 8 months (pre-primary age) are enrolled in three of the classes, while the younger children, aged 3 years to 4 years and 8 months, attend the fourth class. There is also a special educational unit for children classed as having special educational needs (ages 3–7 years).

The school deals with issues of diversity related to religion, ethnicity, language and special needs on a daily basis. The children enrolled the current school year come from five different ethnic backgrounds and seven different religions and languages (due to the continuous increase in immigration rates). Six of the children have been



assessed and are classed as being on the autistic spectrum. By definition, this school is open to diversity and although it cannot yet be considered inclusive, it functions within the context of difference with regards both teachers and children.

The official school language is Greek. This constitutes an initial barrier for the majority of the children. It has been observed that in the initial stages of their school attendance, children tend to socialise only with children from their home country, but this never lasts for long. An attempt is made (especially during break time) to introduce all children to each other and promote friendships through games with simple rules, which can be demonstrated by the teacher (so that language is less of a barrier). Games like football, which are well known to all children, allow the development of strong relationships, bonding and socialising. In addition, teachers always participate in these games in an effort to minimise the distance between themselves and the children. During teaching, children are not excluded because of language differences. An important example is that of storytelling, an activity that takes place on a daily basis. While the story is being told in Greek, teachers maximise the visual and hearing aids (pictures, puppets, YouTube videos, pictures in PowerPoint, movement and sounds) and use dramatisations or theatrical performance in order to facilitate understanding for all.

The national curriculum for pre-primary education was assessed and restructured recently to focus on skills development rather than knowledge acquisition (including individualised instruction, new methodological approaches, etc.). During in-service seminars, teachers have expressed their concerns regarding excessive teaching contexts, pressing time frames and the tendency of the context to address the average learner. In a kindergarten setting, the teacher has the flexibility to adjust teaching methods and take the time to alternate and repeat specific educational targets. Without teacher intervention and willingness to adjust and implement the curriculum in ways that address the different learning profiles of the children, some children would be excluded from mainstream classroom teaching.

### **3. Inclusive highlight**

The current example was chosen from the observation notes because an attempt is being made to change the school to a more inclusive environment. Despite the fact that it has all the credentials to be classed as a setting which excludes children with special needs, in the current academic year these children are being educated in a special unit by a specialist teacher. Although there is still a long way to go, children are spending substantially less time in the special setting, class and specialist teachers are co-operating in an attempt to co-plan and co-teach in order that no children are left out. The use of the special unit is intermittent and most of the new teaching staff and children are gradually being transferred to their mainstream



classrooms. With the support of the head teacher, the teaching schedule has been changed so that the specialist teacher has at least one break time with all the mainstream teachers in the school. This allows detailed discussion of the lesson plans for the following few days, which all teachers have to prepare in advance and submit to the head teacher at the beginning of the week. This in turn allows any necessary teaching aims, methods, activities and aids to be put in place in an attempt to remove all barriers to learning for all children.

The example recorded in school observations was related to the subject of the water cycle. Both of the teachers (mainstream and specialist) had discussed and agreed upon the educational aims in advance. The teaching method used was quite a challenge due to the children's different languages and the various difficulties in concentration and hyperactivity. The initial thinking was to approach the theme through large pictures and create the water cycle on the board alongside a story which would explain what was happening in a simple way. This idea was eventually rejected since both the language used for teaching and the minimised participation of the children would impose a number of barriers and exclude children from the learning process.

The constant exchange of ideas led to the choice of creating the scenery for a theatrical play. Based on a Greek fairy tale called *The Journey of a Water Drop*, written by Aiki Vougiouklaki, the children were given a light blue and a white ribbon each and they were asked to guess what they would be transformed into a few minutes later. Following a number of guesses they said 'water' and were immediately asked to get their ribbons, were changed into water drops by the touch of the water fairy (teacher) and followed the music on a mystical journey. The classical music used was indicative of the feelings of the water drop as it was going from place to place, while the teacher told the story in detail, giving children the general guidelines to act out their roles. A PowerPoint slide projected on the classroom wall showed pictures of the fairy tale, in order to accompany the teacher's narration and provide an additional aid to understanding the plot. Very briefly, the story begins when a water drop, which is relaxing on a cloud (happy relaxed music), meets a number of friends in the sky, such as birds, an aeroplane, etc. Suddenly the wind makes the cloud move quickly, hitting the other clouds in the sky. The water drop is scared (music changes accordingly) and falls on to a leaf, then slides into a river and through a farm, ending up in a narrow pipe. It goes into a house and is used to wash dishes and clothes. It gets dizzy and ends up in another pipe leading to the sea. There it meets the sun and rides a sun ray back to the clouds. The whole lesson ended with looking at the pictures taken by the water drop on her journey (the pictures from the fairy tale). The pictures were put on the board, in a cycle, to remind the children of their magical and wonderful experience!



The teaching method, alongside the music and pictures (during the play and at the end) addressed the learning needs of all children in the mainstream classroom. It eliminated barriers related to language, concentration and hyperactivity. Children had the freedom to act out their roles and express themselves in any way they chose. The music was very indicative of feelings while the simultaneous use of hearing and visual aids allowed for the elimination of language barriers. The following day, the children were drawing pictures, narrating the story and asking questions related to the story.

#### **4. Other evidence of quality IECE**

The above teaching differentiation approach was presented to an in-service teacher training seminar and used as an example to initiate discussion among teachers in a professional development platform.

The fact that the following day, during free play time, all children successfully responded to the activities planned by the teachers and based on the story plot constitutes evidence of learning. Activities were related to drawing the missing picture from the water cycle, putting mixed up pictures in the correct order, narrating the story (using figures) to the two children who were absent the previous day. In addition, the story was used by the teacher as a basis for further development of the subject and the participation of the children was particularly encouraging.

Both the teachers (mainstream and specialist) have a first degree in pre-primary education, hence they are aware of the available ways in which a teaching plan can be taught, the variety of options available and the aids needed to facilitate learning according to age and possible difficulties.

Apart from the two teachers, and the discussion of some details with colleagues, no other stakeholders were involved. Communication and collaboration with parents is very limited (mainly due to language). The involvement of other partners is not the norm in Cyprus and the participation of external partners would require written permission from the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Policy cannot be changed solely by official mandates and legal frameworks. Although their importance is unquestionable and in the context of Cyprus should become an educational priority, what is described above raises the argument that teachers can substantially alter the way things are done within their school settings. The hope is that these practices will constitute the driving force for change in practice and official policy, leading to more inclusive settings.