

Neoliberal versus Social Justice Reforms in Education Policy and Practice: Discourses, Politics and Disability Rights in Education

Abstract

This article uses Critical Discourse Analysis in order to discuss the equity and social justice implications of an envisaged education reform agenda in Cyprus, as articulated by two consultation reports commissioned by the World Bank. The reports highlight, inter alia, the imperative to improve teaching and enhance accountability regimes with regard to students' learning. Selected extracts from these documents are analysed in order to highlight the absence of a social justice discourse in the rhetoric of educational reforms, despite the alleged centrality of a social justice discourse in official policy. The reports fail to include issues of social justice and learner diversity in discussing the necessity to strengthen the existing teacher policy framework and to mobilize structural educational reforms. This omission is indicative of the neoliberal imperatives that drive the envisaged education policy reforms as well as the low priority attributed to issues of equity and learner diversity, with particular reference to students designated as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D).

Key words: social justice, education policy, special educational needs, inclusion

Setting the context: educational reforms and the role of supranational organizations

Supranational organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for African Unity, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank play a crucial role in the process of education policy formulation and implementation across diverse socio-political contexts. Ball (2012) discusses the cosmopolitan nature of education policy reforms by exploring the ways in which global politics and policies are reciprocally related and have an immense impact on national reform efforts. These global agencies are key players in shaping the 'context of influence' (Berkhout & Wielemans, 1999, p. 417) against which national education policy agendas are conceptualized, negotiated and enacted, while it is frequently the case that they articulate contradictory responses to globalization (Vongalis-Macrow, 2005). As such, they confound the process of education policy formulation and implementation (Berkhout & Wielemans, 1999).

The emergence of new policy networks are contingent on and constituted by local and global forces against which national policies are formulated and enacted (Rutkowski, 2007). Vongalis-Macrow (2005) cites the examples of UNESCO and the World Bank and provides a critical analysis of the ways in which these global agencies exert a prodigious effect on shaping the ideological underpinnings of education reform agendas across the globe. In particular, it is suggested that “UNESCO policy specifically takes an anti-neoliberal stance” while the “World Bank discourse is grounded in the language of neoliberal efficiency criteria” (Vongalis-Macrow, 2005, p. 6).

Klees, Samoff, and Stromquist (2012, p. xvi) highlight the “ascending role” of the World Bank in the international policymaking arena and characterizes the World Bank as an “undisputed influential actor in education, often more so than UNESCO.” The OECD is “the source of the ideology which drives the World Bank’s as well as WTO’s and PISA’s ‘human capital’ approach to educational policy” (Ball 2013, p. 38). These dominant globalized policy networks act towards disseminating particular discourses that contribute to the propagation of neoliberal reforms across diverse sociopolitical contexts (Rutkowski, 2007; Ball, 2012).

The global education reform movement (GERM) has emerged from the interests of supranational development agencies and has precipitated the ascendancy of high stakes accountability regimes in educational systems across diverse sociopolitical jurisdictions (Sahlberg, 2010; Clark, 2012). In consequence, the overarching impact of the ideological underpinnings of this movement has undermined concerns about promoting a social democratic vision and a social justice discourse in education policy and practice as well as more equitable educational outcomes for learner diversity (Sahlberg, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

Despite the overwhelming influence of these globalized policy discourses, we should not lose sight of the dialectic of the global and the local and the ways in which local cultures and ideological dynamics become globalized. As de Sousa Santos (2006) suggests, “there is no originally global position; what we call globalization is always the successful globalization of a particular localism” (p. 396). Hence, global movements such as GERM should be seen as an example of the ways in which local neoliberal policy developments, like the ones that took place in England and the USA, have been globalized.

In policy analysis the aim is to understand the ways in which these global policy discourses interact with local dynamics to shape national policy landscapes (Ball, 2013; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016). The World Bank has been characterized as “the most authoritative source of education policy” (Klees et al., 2012, p. xvi) that steers and shapes national policy landscapes across the globe, especially in less developed countries, such as Cyprus, which have borrowed money from the World Bank and are subsequently expected to fulfil a number of policy commitments (Ball, 2013).

In light of the above considerations, the following sections critically examine two national reports commissioned by the World Bank in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) of the Republic of Cyprus. The reports under study are of significant interest as they provide an up-to-date and detailed analysis of key aspects of the current education policy framework in Cyprus. The two reports suggest a number of evidence-based policy reforms that have already exerted influence on recent policy changes in Cyprus (e.g. teacher appointments) (MoEC 2015), while they instigate discussion on the necessity to introduce examinations for the transition from primary to secondary education (Paideia-News, 1.10.2015).

The first report provides an overview of the ‘Teacher Policies in the Republic of Cyprus’ (World Bank, 2014a), while the second one provides an ‘Analysis of the Function and Structure of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Cyprus’ (World Bank, 2014b). The Reports provide a historical overview of the reform initiatives in Cyprus, discuss the current function and structure of the Ministry of Education and Culture and provide insights into the processes of teacher selection and recruitment/appointments and transfers, professional development, teacher autonomy, ways of monitoring and evaluation of teacher practice and autonomy, school leadership, while articulating a number of suggestions and envisaged future reforms in these areas.

This article aims to provide a critical analysis of some aspects of these reports through the lens of a social justice discourse in education policy and practice with particular reference to students designated as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D). The analysis is conducted in view of the current policy rhetoric in Cyprus, as articulated in New National Curricula, on the imperative to create a “humane and democratic school”; the aim being to maximize the learning potential of every individual child by “remov[ing] any adverse consequence that frequently affect children with disabilities, with difficult family background, with financial hardship and different cultural background” (MoEC, 2008, p. 4).

The analysis highlights the predominance of neoliberal policy imperatives enshrined in these reports and second, documents the marginalization of a social justice discourse and reaffirms the low priority attributed to issues of difference and diversity.

Even though a social justice discourse in education can be understood and enacted in varied ways (Brown, 2004; Hattam, Brennan, Zipin, & Comber, 2009), a social justice discourse within the context of an inclusive education reform agenda (Ainscow, 2005; Slee, 2006) aims at “benefitting the least advantaged” groups of students (Bringhouse, 2010, p. 41), who experience multiple and overlapping forms of social and educational disadvantage on the basis of their corporeal, intellectual, emotional and biographical differences (Liasidou, 2013).

Critical Policy research and the role of discourse

Discourse theory has been widely used in policy analysis in education with a view to documenting the ways in which policy texts promote certain discourses at the expense of others, while also focusing on the occasional hybrid nature of these discourses (Ball, 1990; Taylor, 2004). The emphasis on policy as discourse (Ball, 1993) highlights the ways in which power is enshrined in the dominant discourses as they authoritatively promote “meaning systems over others” (Ball, 2004) and set out the “discursive contours” (Liasidou, 2011, p.889) against which educational policymaking is formulated and enacted. The discourses that constitute these “meaning systems” are determined by key policy makers who are the bearers of the “agentic marshalling of discourse” (Bacchi, 2000, p. 52).

Moving beyond conventional analytical frameworks, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as a methodological and analytical tool in order to focus on the meaning of the text, in order to make transparent the dominant discourses that imbue the text (Ball, 1993; Bacchi, 2000). Simultaneously, the aim is to expose the ways in which less dominant discourses are affected by the imposition of dominant ones. Taylor (2004) refers to the “marginalized discourses” or as differently referred

to, the “linguistic silences” or “discursive absences” (Stensson & Watt, 1999; Fairclough, 2000) of the text, which have an equally significant bearing on the policymaking process, for the “‘unsaid’ and the ‘unwritten’, and can be as significant as what is said” (Luke, 2002, p.104).

For instance, the discourses of equity and social justice are frequently marginalized due to the ascendancy of the ‘new global economy’ discourses, which “‘flow’ through the transnational business-government network, and are recontextualized (and, as the concept entails, transformed) from genre to genre, from one domain of discourse to another” (Fairclough, 2001a, p.130), and are implicated in the power/knowledge nexus underpinning the process of education policy formulation and implementation.

Prior to explaining the analytical approach adopted for the purposes of this study, it is important to state that CDA is a heterogeneous and contested transdisciplinary field of study as it draws on diverse theoretical perspectives and methods (Fairclough, 2001b; Van Dijk, 1995). Hence, the analytical approach adopted depends on the scope and aims of the research agenda and its social change expectations (Fairclough, 2012).

The following section sets out the discursive context against which these Reports have been framed, thereby providing an interdiscursive analysis with the emphasis placed on social (intertextual and interdiscursive aspects of text), rather than the structural (linguistic) aspects. The section following that provides a textual analysis of some aspects of the Reports that document the absence of social justice discourse in discussing the necessity to strengthen the existing teacher policy framework and to mobilize structural educational reforms. The analysis of the text involves the identification of the prevalent discourses as well as the marginalized

discourses, while by adopting an intertextual approach the aim is to analyze the text against its discursive context (e.g. in relation to the prevalent discourses that are enshrined in World Bank's rhetoric as it will be discussed in the next section) so as to identify recurrent discursive patterns and to proceed to the stages of explanation and interpretation (Fairclough, 2001b).

It should be noted that the analysis of the two Reports is indicative and not exhaustive since there can be numerous analytical possibilities and alternatives in accordance with the aims and scope of the research agenda. As Ball (1994) puts it, "...no one interpretational mode or set of theoretical tools or interpretational stance is adequate or exhaustive of the analytical possibilities of policy analysis. The same data can be subjected to very different types and levels of interpretation" (p.109). Moreover, it also needs noting that the validity and reliability of CDA as a methodological and analytical tool has been questioned on the grounds of its subjective and allegedly biased character. This kind of criticism, however, is unjustified since CD analysts are not only explicit on their interest in facilitating the process of socially just change, but they are also concerned with providing arguments that are characterized by logical reasoning and are supported by relevant evidence (Wood & Kroger 2000; see also Liasidou, 2008, for a more detailed analysis of these criticisms and the counterarguments in defense of CDA).

Neoliberal ideologies, professional accountability and a social justice discourse in education

In recent years, there has been an increased theoretical interest in exploring the ways in which corporate-driven ideologies have monopolized educational reforms in the so-called Western-centric socio-political systems. These reforms have concentrated on

the imperative to increase efficiency and accountability under globalization (Goodson, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Connell, 2013). These developments have resulted in the creation of a “performative” culture of public schooling (Ball & Olmedo 2013; Ball, 2004) that promotes mono-dimensional conceptualizations of teaching and learning gauged against standardized tests, performance indicators and league table rankings. As a direct consequence of this kind of corporate-driven educational milieu, concerns about human rights, social justice, collegiality and the common good (Armstrong & Barton, 2009), have been substituted with neoliberal ideologies and the unfettered quest for effectiveness, competitiveness, and profitability (Hursh & Henderson, 2011; Giroux, 2012). Rather than valorising learner diversity as a positive aspect of educational experience, learner diversity is regarded as being a major threat to standardized performance indicators. According to Giroux (2012), the real danger of neoliberal education policy and practice is “political illiteracy that views difference rather than bigotry as a great threat to learning and democracy” (p.40).

Hickling-Hudson and Klees (2012) discuss the preoccupation of the World Bank with neoliberal imperatives and the marginalization of alternative conceptualizations of educational policy. These alternatives include sustained efforts to promote the right to education, to challenge the inequitable nature of current schooling and subsequently, and to put a pronounced emphasis on equity as a means to achieving quality. In view of these considerations, Nordtreit (2012) provides a critical analysis of the World Bank’s education strategy ‘*Learning for All: Investing in People’s Knowledge and Skills to Promote Development*’ (World Bank, 2011) and discusses its neoliberal orientations that are starkly antithetical to its rhetorical proclamations to cater to all people in terms of instilling skills and ensuring

employability, even amongst the poorest and the most marginalized groups of people.

As it is emphatically pointed out:

...the terms *justice* and *injustice* are not found in the strategy document. The World Bank strategy for education does not consider issues of wealth distribution, power relations, or the possible role of education as a tool to propagate disparities and to continue patterns of injustice (p.28).

Along similar lines, Soudien (2012) points to the gap between laudable rhetoric on the importance of providing education that is “holistic” and “meaningful” and the World Bank’s proposals for introducing standardized benchmarking tests to ensure mono-dimensional understandings of accountability measures and effectiveness indicators. The education strategy provides a limited view of education that is merely centred on technical and economic issues while ignoring the significant impact of contextual dynamics and socially toxic conditions that plague the lives and educational trajectories of certain groups of students (Verger & Bonal, 2012).

The above concerns and problems can also be raised in exploring the discursive realities enshrined in the two reports under study, whereby a social justice discourse is blatantly absent. In particular, the next section concentrates on the ways in which the two reports seem to place a mono-dimensional emphasis on the imperative to introduce effectiveness indicators that fail to take into consideration vulnerable groups of students and in particular students designated as having SEN/D. This is followed by an analysis of the ways in which accountability frameworks should be informed by a social justice discourse so as to provide positive pressure (Fullan, 2010) to enhance the learning and participation of hitherto marginalized and excluded groups of students. Bearing in mind Fairclough’s maxim that social and, by implication, educational change is ‘discourse driven’ (Taylor, 2004), articulating alternative ways of conceptualizing and enacting accountability frameworks

constitutes an integral aspect of CDA. In addition to its analytical and methodological role in unveiling asymmetrical power relations that act to the detriment of vulnerable groups of individuals, CDA has an action-oriented interest as it is concomitantly concerned with exploring “epistemological and political possibilities and alternatives” (Luke, 1996, p.7) that have the potential to mobilize socially just change.

Accountability frameworks and students designated as having SEN/D

The neoliberal discourse of increased effectiveness and efficiency of the educational sector is clearly evidenced in these reports and is linked to the imperative to introduce accountability measures and assessment criteria in order to warrant the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational sector. In particular, the reports highlight that accountability regimes and the evaluation of teachers in Cyprus do not include any measures of teachers’ effects on student outcomes (including learning). Even in terms of the inspectors in Cyprus and their teacher evaluation role, it is very rightly pointed out that “no account is taken of students’ outcomes” (World Bank, 2014a, p.25); hence it is obvious that the system is characterized by a patent lack of accountability frameworks that has a significant bearing on the process of students’ learning. As it is stated in one of the reports:

Evaluations and assessments are vital for collecting evidence on whether students are learning and teaching is effective. Regular monitoring is needed of all programs, teaching and learning methods, curricula, resources, facilities, and administrative structures. In Cyprus, many of these assessment functions are missing while others need to be enhanced. It is currently very difficult to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the education sector as little information has been collected on student and teacher performance. (World Bank, 2014b, p.6)

Moreover, it is pointed out that:

There are no national standards for student learning nor is there a national policy on assessment. As a result, each teacher uses his or her own criteria, methods, and instruments. Consequently, it is difficult for the MoEC to identify and address systemic issues of education quality in a timely manner. National examinations not only serve to certify student achievement but also are a good way to hold schools accountable. (World Bank, 2014b, p.21)

One of the reports also points to the fact that, “There are no national-level data on student performance, and the only national exam required of students is the exit exam upon graduation from secondary education, which is also used as an entrance examination for public universities” (World Bank, 2014a, p.22). However, it should be noted that even this kind of national-level data cannot be considered as being part of a learner-centred accountability system -as discussed earlier- due to the existence of a “shadow education system” (Bray, 2007) -a global education phenomenon that is also endemic in other schooling systems such as South Korea and Japan- that works alongside the public education system in order to prepare students for these exams. Teachers’ policies should be discussed and (re)framed against the existence of a “shadow education system” that undermines professional accountability and advances skewed understandings of teachers’ and schools’ effectiveness indicators in relation to students’ outcomes. Simultaneously, the existence of this system needs to be defined in terms of the ways in which it exacerbates rather than alleviates educational inequality (Klees, 2012).

There is no doubt that establishing some kind of accountability measures in relation to students’ learning is imperative. This is especially true when we bear in mind that increased accountability can potentially enhance the educational outcomes of all students, including students designated as having SEN/D. McLaughlin and Rhim (2007) draw evidence from the introduction of mandatory accountability for students with SEN/D in the US educational system to suggest that not only these

accountability measures have enhanced the placement rates of students with SEN/D in mainstream schools, but they have also contributed to the improvement of their academic performance without, however, ignoring the tensions and dilemmas that are endemic in these accountability frameworks along with the ways in which they can have an adverse effect on this group of students. Along similar lines, Danforth (2015) provides an insightful analysis of the ways in which a lack of a social justice narrative in establishing accountability regimes can undermine support of inclusion as a means to reinstate the rights of students with SEN/D to have access to quality forms of educational provision in mainstream schools. His analysis is indicative of the ways in which certain forms of accountability can be counterproductive to attempts to create learning communities that cater to the needs of students with SEN/D.

While the reports under study acknowledge the fact the Ministry of Education and Culture is “accountable” for “(t)he inclusion of all children” (World Bank, 2014b, p.16), they make no reference to issues of social justice and equality of opportunity against which to (re)conceptualize and (re)frame the process of educational change. Even though it is pointed out that “the educational system in Cyprus does not promote equity in education” (World Bank, 2014b, p.60), this statement is limited to the necessity to “Evaluate the system to ensure more equity in the types of teachers appointed across different types of school systems” (World Bank, 2014b, p.30), without articulating any further concerns or suggesting relevant implementation strategies to this end.

The two reports seem to place a mono-dimensional emphasis on the imperative to introduce effectiveness indicators, which not only fail to take into consideration equity and social justice issues but also propose a payment-by-results scenario. As it is suggested in one of the reports “[...] principals lack incentives: they

are not rewarded -with monetary or other types of rewards- based on the performance of their schools” (World Bank, 2014a, p.33). The proposed payment by results scenario can potentially make principals and teachers reluctant to teach vulnerable groups of students, as these students are thought to undermine their schools’ quest for educational excellence as this is measured against narrow performance indicators (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). In the absence of a social justice discourse in educational reforms proposals, the envisaged introduction of accountability regimes can engender practices of “educational triage” (Youdell, 2004) that categorize students on the grounds of their value added contribution to neoliberal benchmarks of educational excellence. As a result, the aim is

to concentrate resources and attention on the students perceived to have the potential to capitalise on the supports provided and thereby help to improve a school’s performance by achieving a higher benchmark. Such practices....can also work to detract focus from students whose potential may not so positively perceived, skewing support in favour of those deemed most likely to get over the minimum benchmark. (Graham, 2015, pp.12-13)

Hence, despite the importance of accountability measures and effectiveness indicators along with the imperative to be taken into consideration in future reform efforts, these factors need to be supplemented by concerns about the ways in which schools should be encouraged and become accountable in terms of providing more equitable and socially just forms of provision for vulnerable groups of students (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006; Bringhouse, 2010).

That said, it is imperative to introduce new accountability measures as well as effectiveness indicators so as to create incentives and make schools and teachers accountable to focus resources on groups of students, who are entangled in a complex web of social and educational disadvantage, including students with SEN/D (Artiles et al., 2006; Bringhouse, 2010; Liasidou, 2013).

An enhanced emphasis on monitoring the effectiveness of teachers and schools should therefore be pursued in tandem with concerns about improving the quality of teaching and by implication, the effectiveness of teaching practices in meeting the needs of vulnerable groups of students. Otherwise, assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational system can be reduced to a sterile “teaching to the test” and data-driven educational culture that is devoid of social democratic ideals and has a pernicious effect on vulnerable groups of students. As Fullan (2006) suggests, teaching and learning are frequently discussed with reference to student outcomes and achievement rather than in relation to the quality of teaching, as well as in relation to the extent to which the instructional environment is conducive to students’ learning. At the same time, an increased emphasis on the necessity to provide quality teaching and learning also infers the imperative to measure teachers’ effects on students’ outcomes, with particular reference to students designated as having special educational needs and/ or disabilities (SEN/D).

Correspondingly, Lingard et al. (2016, p. 92) raise concerns about the ways in which school failure is frequently conceived of as being the result of ineffective teachers and inflexible curricula, while losing sight of the ways in which poverty and racism, as well as other sources of social disadvantage, have adverse effects on the lives and educational trajectories of certain groups of students. In light of these considerations, the authors point to the imperative to improve and democratize globalized educational accountabilities’ (p. 148), as a response to the ways in which teachers are subject to “perverse accountability” and globalized forms of “educational governance” (p.72), which undermine their pedagogical role and bring to bear dire implications for students’ learning and socio-emotional well-being (Talmor, Reiter, & Feigin, 2005).

Striking a balance amongst various forms of accountability can form the basis for creating an educational system that moves beyond high stakes accountability measures to create effective, socially just and non-discriminatory learning communities for all (Ainscow & Miles, 2009; Smith & Douglas, 2014). This is a serious issue that needs to be carefully considered in light of international legal mandates to foster greater inclusive policies and practices, an issue that will be discussed, as part of the discursive analytic approach adopted in this article, in the second part of the following section.

The next section analyzes the ways in which the Reports fail to include issues of social justice and learner diversity in discussing the necessity to promote professional development opportunities for prospective and serving teachers, in spite of the centrality of the Education for All Agenda in Governmental rhetoric (Republic of Cyprus, 2015). The Education for All (EFA) agenda, commissioned by UNESCO, is an example of a ‘globalizing discourse of inclusion’ as a means to fostering socially just forms of schooling for learner diversity (Liasidou, 2012). This agenda has marked a new educational era in reinstating all children’s right to have access to quality education. Official rhetoric embraces this agenda without however articulating any proposed changes towards this end. As it is pointed out in one of the reports: “The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) is a mandate to provide all children in Cyprus with a relevant, quality education” (World Bank, 2014b, p. 9). Despite this rhetorical commitment the reports under study remain silent about the imperative to mobilize reforms to enhance the participation and learning of all students including vulnerable groups of students.

Professional development, inclusive education and disability rights

Notwithstanding the propagation of international legal imperatives to provide for learner diversity on the grounds of special educational needs and/or disabilities, the Reports do not refer to the education of students with SEN/D and the ways in which teacher education policies should be (re)framed within the context of an inclusive education reform agenda (Slee, 2011; Liasidou, 2015).

Inclusive education has become an international policy imperative that aims at promoting socially just and non-discriminatory learning communities for all students irrespective of their biological and/or biographical attributes. The notion of inclusion is a values-based quest that envisages challenging the barriers to achievement and participation experienced by vulnerable groups of students and in particular, students designated as having SEN/D by creating effective and equitable forms of educational provision for learner diversity (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010; Slee, 2011; Liasidou, 2012). In this respect, inclusion is understood and theorized as being inexorably linked with the notions of social justice and human rights and articulates a new vision of educational reform efforts that moves beyond a special education discourse.

In terms of “Special Needs Education” the report simply makes a generic statement of the necessity to mobilize some organizational changes with a view to “providing support for all children with special needs (under the provision of the separate special education Act)” (World Bank, 2014b, pp.54-55), as well as referring to the necessity that the “District Offices would offer advisory services for pedagogy (including psychological services and special needs), administrative, and management concerns to schools” (World Bank, 2014b, p.32) without making any specific recommendations.

Thus, while giving specific recommendations for a number of issues pertaining to teacher professional development, the two reports make no reference to the necessity to provide professional development opportunities for prospective and serving teachers so as to get acquainted with the principles of inclusive pedagogies (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Liasidou & Svensson, 2013). This is a serious issue that attests to the low priority attributed to issues of professional development for inclusion in Cyprus (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009; Liasidou & Antoniou, 2015). For instance, one of the reports points to the fact that:

Prospective teachers whose studies do not include the teaching of specific subjects required of all teachers in Cyprus (e.g., Teaching of Modern Greek, Teaching of History, and Teaching of Religious Education) are asked to attend a compulsory training program on those subjects offered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI) (World Bank, 2014a, p.9)

The same report also points out that the program of studies of the Department of Education at the University of Cyprus was revised in order to address the lack of qualified primary teachers for teaching English as a second language (World Bank, 2014a, p.8), while it makes no reference to the lack of qualified teachers who are expected to provide support teaching for students designated as having SEN/D in Cypriot secondary schools. Currently these teachers are not required to have any qualifications in Inclusive (Special) Education (MoEC, 2013, Circular 7.1.10.2/4).

Even though the needs of this group of students do not essentially differ from other students, these students might need more intensive, direct or sometimes more specialist pedagogical practices (Corbett & Norwich, 1998; Norwich & Lewis 2001; Davies & Florian, 2004; Norwich, 2008), which require expert knowledge and skills (Norwich & Lewis, 2007; Norwich, 2008) to provide differentiated instruction and evidence-based pedagogical practices (e.g. Mitchell, 2008; Tomlinson, 2014).

Moreover, apart from the above considerations, it is evident that the report continues to frame and discuss the role of teacher policies within a special education framework (Lloyd, 2008), while the principles of inclusive education, promoted in Article 24 of UNCR and its professional development implications (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009; Liasidou & Svensson, 2013) are patently ignored.

The dominance of the special education discourse is manifested in the ways in which the report fails to conceptualize the needs of children with SEN/D within the context of inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). For instance, as a proposed policy option, the Report articulates the necessity to “Prepare a special needs strategic plan that specifies functions for DEOs [District Education Office] and any specific elements of primary and secondary learning” (World Bank, 2014b, p.55). The education of these students is thus framed within a special education framework while ignoring the ways in which the concept of special educational needs is to a significant extent the result of an inadequate general educational system that fails to cater to learner diversity (Barton, 1996; Slee, 2007).

The dominance of special education perspective is also inferred from the ways in which the report uses the phraseology of “special needs children” (World Bank, 2014, p.73), thereby ignoring the “people first language” which has been advanced by people with disabilities and their organizations and emphasizes the person first and not her disability (e.g. Donnellan, 1984).

Failure to conceptualize special educational needs and disability issues within the context of an inclusive education reform agenda results to the multiple forms of exclusion and marginalization experienced by students with SEN/D in Cypriot public schools in terms of education legislation (see Liasidou, 2008; 2011), curriculum (see Symeonidou & Mavrou, 2013), and educational practice (see Liasidou & Antoniou,

2015), despite the fact that the Republic of Cyprus ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2011 (Law of 2011, N.8 (III)/2011).

As a signatory state, the Republic of Cyprus is expected to give full consideration to Article 24 of the Convention, the overarching aim of which is to foster ‘an inclusive education system at all levels’ so that “(p)ersons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability” (Article 24/a). With that, it is mandated that teachers “provide the assistance and services guaranteed by those rights.” This professional imperative should be reflected in initial and in service teacher training, evaluation criteria and accountability measures pertaining to teachers’ policies and professional praxis. As it is pointed out in Article 24 of the UNCRPD:

In order to help ensure the realization of this right (see Inclusive education), States Parties shall take appropriate measures...to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

In light of the above considerations, in countries such as the UK, for instance, the school inspectorate body (OFSTED), according to the Revised UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (DFE & DoH, 2014), will seek to see evidence of the support provided to students with SEN/D along with its effect on students’ progress. This is a significant policy development as it places an increased emphasis on the imperative to provide quality provisions for learner diversity on the grounds of disability.

Teachers' and principals' evaluations focus on the extent and the quality of the learning support provided to this group of students, along with its impact on students' progress. At the same time, as part of teachers' accountability and evaluation procedures, teachers should use evidence-based interventions as part of a graduated approach that includes a review of the progress made by students designated as having a SEN/D. This also includes providing adaptations to existing support as required. The support should be reviewed and monitored by the class or subject teacher in close collaboration with parents, the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCOs) and students. The quality and effectiveness of the provision and its impact on this group of students should be regularly reviewed and monitored (see for instance the Revised UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice in the UK [DfE & DoH, 2014] that aims to promote accountability and "transparency of data" (Fullan, 2010) with regard to the educational outcomes of students with SEN).

Neoliberal understandings of inclusion and implications for learner diversity

Despite the fact that concerns valorising learner diversity by establishing a "rights respecting" ethos across schools at the epicentre of education reform efforts (e.g. UNICEF UK, 2013), the two reports make no reference to issues of learner diversity and inclusion against which to (re)conceptualize and (re)frame reform initiatives (Slee, 2012; Liasidou; 2015). The only reference to learner diversity found in these documents articulates the imperative of preparing a National Cultural Policy, with the aim of 'Protecting cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and bi-communal collaboration' (World Bank, 2014b, p.33). This reference has political connotations as it alludes to the necessity of nurturing positive relations between the Greek-Cypriot and the Turkish-Cypriot community of the island.

This section discusses the ways in which reports under study advance a neoliberal version of inclusion that aims at facilitating the production of the “ideal student” (Harwood & Humphry 2008, p. 380) who is favoured by neoliberal policy imperatives (Dyson, 2005; Liasidou, 2012). Neoliberal conceptualizations of inclusion concentrate on a meritocratic perspective and the ability of the individual to develop and thrive within a competitive educational market place that positions “education as an investment and not as a human right” (Klees et al., 2012, p. xvii). As it is stated in one of the reports while referring to the Government’s manifesto:

The manifesto sets out a vision of an educational system that encourages a nation of free-thinking people within a democratic framework, that is inclusive, that allows individuals to develop and express themselves, and that provides opportunities for learning throughout life [...] The strategy document spells out several specific goals including: (i) developing a skilled workforce that can respond to labor market needs; (ii) promoting job quality and lifelong learning; (iii) improving the performance of education and training systems at all levels; and (iv) increasing participation in tertiary education. (World Bank, 2014b, p.16)

What is presented here is a neoliberal version of inclusion, whereby current schooling is positioned as a site “that allows for individuals to develop” so as to maximize their economic and social usefulness in order to “respond to labor market needs”. These considerations coupled with the “technocratic narrative” of accountability measures discussed earlier, which is devoid of any social justice concerns, “holds inclusion as a means to an end, as a helpful vehicle in the service to the larger technical goal, as an instructionally useful way to raise standardised test scores for disabled students” without articulating any “commitment to the fulfilment of democratic principles” (Danforth, 2015, p.13). As a result, those individuals, who are perceived as not being capable of achieving these ends, are negatively positioned and ostracized without

taking into consideration the ways in which they are entangled in multiple forms of social and educational disadvantage (Liasidou, 2013).

In a similar vein, Waitoller and Kozleski (2015) discuss the ways in which the predominance of neoliberal ideologies in current schooling and the corporate culture abetted by them have “resulted in the continuation of labelling and segregation of those students considered different from the dominant culture of the school” (p. 23). Thus, notwithstanding rhetorical proclamations about the necessity to promote an education reform agenda for all, certain groups of students are inadvertently positioned as negatively different and as a result, according to Waitoller and Kozleski (2015) “Education for all may be transformed into inspection for all” (p. 24) against an “ableistic and normative agenda” that pathologizes difference and diversity. Disability has been constructed as a negative ontological attribute that poses a major threat to the performative culture of current schooling, while educational professionals have been negatively predisposed to the prospect of having students with SEN/D in their classrooms as their professional effectiveness has been solely gauged against performance indicators linked to examination results and data-driven accountability regimes (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012).

New capitalism and its neoliberal ideological orientations have created an educational culture of standardization, whereby quality of practice is contingent on the extent to which an organization can meet these standards. The latter concerns are crucial in adopting a reflective and reflexive stance towards the role of current schooling as its associated accountability regimes to gauge

the value added by the school to what students know and are able to do’
irrespective of students’ socioeconomic background and their privileged or subordinated status afforded by it, which is considered as a ‘power predictor for their educational success or failure. (Waitoller & Kozleski’s, 2015, p. 5)

Conclusions

Even though social justice reforms have been legally mandated in order to safeguard the rights of disenfranchised groups of students to receive equitable and quality forms of educational provision, a human rights discourse is significantly absent from the educational vision and strategic planning articulated in the two reports under study. Having been positioned as the most powerful and influential global policy actor that determines and influences national policy agendas, the World Bank's educational policy rhetoric needs to be critically analysed and discussed against concerns about creating more participatory and effective learning communities for all.

Providing a critique of the ways in which educational reform efforts are framed within the context of neoliberal ideologies, necessitates an informed understanding of the ways in which a social justice discourse can (re)frame current schooling and articulate a new vision for education policy and practice that caters to the needs of all students, irrespective of their biographical experiences and developmental trajectories. The World Bank's preoccupation with corporate-driven educational regimes have been routinely manifested in ways in which educational quality has been reduced to quantitative measures of effectiveness indicators that silence the means in which schools regenerate rather than alleviate wider social injustices. Alternative conceptualizations of schooling, premised on the imperative to foster social democratic ideals for equitable and just forms of educational provision, have been subordinated to the demands to enhance the effectiveness of educational systems in terms of students' educational outcomes and examination results. Those students, whose performative worth has been perceived as being incompatible with dominant effectiveness indicators, have been negatively positioned and relegated to the margins of education.

A critical analysis of the two national reports commissioned by the World Bank has demonstrated the ways in which global and local dynamics work in synergy to formulate an education reform agenda, whereby attempts to “design inclusive, supportive learning environments that promote broad and multiple forms of diversity compete and collide with reforms based on a neoliberal agenda (i.e., accountability, flexibility, and choice)” (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2015, p.3). This perspective is manifested in ways in which the Reports fail to address issues of learner diversity and set out a strategic vision for providing equitable and socially just forms of education. Promoting forms of professional accountability that fail to address the needs of all students and transcend reductionist forms of teaching and learning linked to quantifiable measures of educational excellence, can have pernicious effects on attempts to create welcoming and effective learning communities for all. The absence of a social justice discourse is indicative of the ways in which students’ differences - on the grounds of various biological and cultural markers of difference- are silenced and superseded by concerns to promote forms of accountability based on a neoliberal agenda, which gives rise to and legitimizes reductionist understandings of schooling and pedagogy.

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