

# Understanding children's constructions of meanings about other children: implications for inclusive education

*Kyriaki Messiou*  
University of Hull

*Key words:* inclusion, children's voices, children's meanings, primary schools.

**This paper explores the factors that influence the way children construct meanings about other children, and especially those who seem to experience marginalisation, within school contexts. The research involved an ethnographic study in a primary school in Cyprus over a period of 5 months. Qualitative methods were used, particularly participant observations and interviews with children. Interpretation of the data suggests that children's perceptions about other children, and especially those who come to experience marginalisation, are influenced by the following factors: other children and the interactions between them; adults' way of behaving in the school; the existing structures within the school; and the cultures of the school and the wider educational context. Even though the most powerful factor was viewed to be the adults' influence, it was rather the interweaving between different factors that seemed to lead to the creation of particular meanings for other children. In the end, it is argued that children's voices should be seen as an essential element within the process of developing inclusive practices.**

## Listening to children's voices in research

The idea of listening to children's voices in relation to matters that concern them used to be a rather neglected area. However, this idea has been gaining ground in recent years and especially after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. Accepting children's right to be heard, and the fact that by listening to their voices we have much to learn, is closely related to the way childhood is viewed nowadays. It is agreed by many authors (e.g., James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mills, 2000; Pilcher & Wagg, 1996; Prout & James, 1990) that childhood is socially constructed and the child is viewed as a social actor, or in other words the child is viewed as 'being' rather than as 'becoming' where the notion of change and alteration is implied in order for the child to fit into the adults' world. Furthermore, as Prout (2002) suggests,

including children in research as research participants rather than objects has been shown to reveal many novel aspects of the areas under investigation.

Harden, Scott, Backett-Milburn and Jackson (2000) suggest that research which involves children is shaped according to the way in which researchers conceive childhood. Similarly, Clough and Barton (1995) argue that by selecting a method, we immediately attach a particular view and ideology to the area we are investigating. Mayall (2001) refers to two approaches when carrying out research that involves children: 'research on children' where the adult is superior to the child and therefore has the knowledge to document childhood, and 'research with children' where emphasis is given to the fact that good information about childhood must start from children themselves.

Apart from these two approaches, I would argue that there is another approach, midway between these two, that of 'research about children'. This kind of research – although it does not treat children as subjects but rather as active participants – at the same time, it does not involve children in the design of the research, or even involve children themselves as researchers. And this is what I consider my work to be: research about children, which aims to allow all children's voices to comprise an essential part on the identification of who experiences marginalisation and who does not. The reason for choosing this approach was because the research was conducted for a PhD study and therefore a strong personal interest based on my background and engagement with the literature existed from the outset, and therefore I decided not to allow children to design or implement the research themselves.

A number of researchers interested with school improvement matters turned towards the voice of students (i.e., Fielding, 2001; Rudduck, Chaplain & Wallace, 1996). However, only few studies concerned with inclusion matters are turned towards students' voices. Rose and Shevlin (2004), working with groups of young people who have experienced marginalised situations in their education,

argue that by listening to their voices ‘enable [s] us to reflect upon how future developments may afford greater opportunities to those who have been previously denied’ (p. 160). Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (1999) refer to students as ‘hidden voices’ who, if listened to, may assist in the development of more inclusive classrooms and schools.

In this study, by placing emphasis on children’s right to be heard and adopting the notion of children as ‘being’, the methodological design was developed. The aims of the study were twofold: (1) to bring to the surface children’s views about how they experience marginalisation at school; and (2) to explore how children come to construct meanings about other children, especially those children who seem to be marginalised. There was also a consideration of the relationship between these meanings and the way children behave towards one another.

Through the process of carrying out the research and analysing the data, marginalisation came to be conceptualised in four different ways within a primary school context (Messiou, 2003, 2006). In this paper, however, the focus will be on the factors that influence the way children construct meanings about other children, and especially those who seem to be marginalised. Bogdan and Taylor (1992, p. 276) refer to the ‘social construction of humanness’, emphasising that what is more important in coming to define a disabled person is not either his or her characteristics, or the social or cultural meanings attached to the particular group to which the person belongs, but rather the nature of the relationship between the definer and the defined; although in relation to deviance, according to Becker (1973, p. 9) and the labelling theory, ‘deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label’. The emphasis here, therefore, is on labels. Furthermore, according to Blumer (1969) and the symbolic interactionism premises, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings these things have for them. Those meanings arise from the social interaction between people that are then modified by persons through an interpretive process. Therefore, both meanings, as well as social interactions, are emphasised here. Whether the above situations applied in the creation of particular meanings regarding the marginalised children within the school will be analysed later.

### Methodology

The research involved an ethnographic study in a primary school in Cyprus over a period of 5 months. The school is located in the suburbs of the city of Nicosia, with 227 children enrolled in it. Qualitative methods were used, particularly participant observations and interviews with children. In addition, some quantitative methods were used, such as sociometric measures. These were, however, analysed in a rather qualitative way.

The development of the methodological design of the study was based on theories of inclusive education on the one hand and on the way children were viewed on the other hand, as it was analysed previously. First of all, if inclusion is about valuing everybody’s ideas and beliefs (Barton,

1997), then including pupils’ voices is essential. In some of the studies that are concerned with students’ views in relation to inclusion (e.g., Allan, 1999; Lewis, 1995; Mordal & Stromstad, 1998; Vlachou, 1997), there is an emphasis on children who are perceived as having special needs, by investigating their own views or their classmates’ attitudes towards them. Following this angle of ‘special needs’ might not be appropriate though, because as Ainscow (2000) suggests, focusing only on special needs is limiting as an agenda, as other wider contextual factors that affect children’s progress might be overlooked. In addition, when carrying out research with emphasis only on children defined as having special needs, there is probably a danger of reproducing certain stereotypes through our own behaviours and especially when we are working with primary-age children (Messiou, 2002, 2003).

Therefore, in order to keep the balance between theory and practice, instead of going into the classroom and withdrawing those children who had special needs statements (the document produced by the Ministry of Education and Culture, which defines both the special needs a child is considered to have after assessment and the special education provision that will be made available to meet the child’s needs), an alternative approach was followed to investigate whether they experience marginalisation or not. Particularly, children who experience marginalisation in the context under investigation were identified, taking into account three perspectives: children’s own views, the researcher’s observations in the school and the teacher’s point of view. The collection of data through different sources, and through the use of different methods, was thought to be very important for the enhancement of the validity of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Based on the above rationale, the study was carried out in four different phases over a period of 5 months. In the first phase, the aim was to get to know the setting and the participants. Open participant observations that included informal discussions with teachers and children as well took place during this phase, which lasted for 6 weeks. In the second phase, the target was to identify those children possibly experiencing marginalisation and to investigate how pupils construct meanings about their classmates. Therefore, more observations followed in the classrooms and in the playground and, mainly, interviews with all the children in the school (227 children) were carried out during these 8 weeks. Particular emphasis was given to the process of interviewing, acknowledging the fact that ‘marginalisation’, as a term, is highly complex for children to understand. In addition, each interview lasted between 10 to 20 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, children were asked to write or say a message that would be sent to another planet expressing what they would like to change at their school if they could change one thing, or something they were not really happy with (‘Message in a bottle’ technique adapted from Davies, 2000), in order to allow possible voices of marginalisation to emerge. Then discussions followed according to what each child said.

Following this discussion, children were asked to name three children from among their classrooms they would like to play with and three they would like to work with and afterwards sociograms were developed according to what the children said. Children's preferences were used as a means for further discussion with children about other children in their classrooms. They did not only speak about those children they chose but also, in trying to justify their choices, about other children whom they did not choose. Finally, discussions about various aspects of school life followed. Classroom practices and playground incidents that were observed were discussed with pupils in order to investigate how they perceived different aspects of school life and in what way these aspects were determinant in constructing meanings about other children (for more details on the techniques used in the interviews, see Messiou, 2003, 2006). Christensen and James (2000) argue that research with children does not necessarily entail adapting different methods, although some techniques might be more appropriate to use with children, and that was the rationale for the use of the above techniques in the study. The third phase focused on those children who were identified as experiencing marginalisation and lasted for 4 weeks. The aim of this second round of interviews was to further explore the way those children were feeling and thinking about the school. Again special techniques were used such as the drawing technique (Ainscow et al., 1999) to elicit children's views. The techniques used in both rounds of interviews were used as a way to explore indirectly a sensitive issue, that of marginalisation. In addition, during this phase, more observations took place with a focus on those children. The last phase, which was completed over a period of 3 weeks, consisted of what I call 'interventions' in the classrooms and a presentation to teachers. The 'interventions' were structured 80-minute sessions that were used with children in all classrooms, with the exception of Years 1 and 2 where only selected activities were used for a period of 40 minutes (for more details, see Messiou, 2003). The idea was to offer something back to the school for allowing me to carry out my research in the school (Sammons, 1989).

The field notes and the interviews' transcripts were analysed and led to the emergence of certain categories that were constantly evident in children's conversations, as well as in the field notes. Illustrative examples from the data are provided to build my argument. In all examples, the names used are pseudonyms the children chose for themselves at the beginning of the first round of interviews. Next, 6 of the 31 children who were identified as experiencing marginalisation are presented.

### **Children identified as possibly experiencing marginalisation**

#### *Yianna 2 (7 years old, Year 1)*

Yianna 2 was a girl with cerebral palsy defined as one of the special needs children in the school. She had repeated a year in the kindergarten. She was receiving five 40-minute teaching periods of individual special education provision at school.

#### *Apostolos (8 years old, Year 2)*

Apostolos had a special needs statement. He was defined as a child with emotional and behavioural problems and he was withdrawn from his classroom for five 40-minute teaching periods per week to receive special education. He had repeated a year in the kindergarten. Apostolos was very aggressive, both verbally and physically, and most of the time he was outside in the playground refusing to go into his classroom. He was assigned a 'school escort' at the beginning of that school year.

#### *Sotiris (9 years old, Year 3)*

Sotiris had Greek origins but was from a country of the ex-Soviet Union Republic. He had many learning difficulties and was defined as experiencing learning difficulties and therefore was receiving individual educational support twice a week. Sometimes he would become aggressive in the playground at playtime.

#### *Poumpou (10 years old, Year 4)*

Poumpou was an overweight child and she had difficulties with learning. She was receiving individual support from her teacher once a week outside the classroom, either alone or with another boy, but not in the context of special education provision. Her family background was associated with many problems. Poumpou had been in another class of the same age group during the previous year and she had been moved by the teachers from that class because it was thought that she had not been accepted by the other children there.

#### *Andreas (11 years old, Year 5)*

Andreas had Greek origins but was from a country of the ex-Soviet Union Republic, and had many difficulties with language. He was defined as having learning difficulties and was receiving individual support from the special education teacher. He did not have friends at school.

#### *Achtenistos (12 years old, Year 6)*

Achtenistos had Greek origins but was from a country of the ex-Soviet Union Republic. He moved from another school in Cyprus to the school that year. He was experiencing many difficulties with learning and particularly with the issue of language. Although other children were involving him sometimes in their games, he did not really have friends.

### **Children's constructions of meanings**

Four broad categories were viewed as the most important factors influencing children's constructions of meanings about other children:

- other children,
- the adults in the school,
- the structures, and
- the existing cultures or differences from the 'norm' in the school.

#### *Other children*

Children's interactions with one another were often found to be influential in their constructions of meanings about

other children, and especially those who come to experience marginalisation.

For example, I witnessed the following incident at playtime, involving Apostolos and a girl from another classroom (C1, Year 3):

*'Children from C1 classroom are having their classroom council meeting in their classroom during playtime. Apostolos stands outside the classroom and looks at them. One girl comes out to tell him to leave and stop observing. He starts asking her what they are doing in the classroom. She tells him that they have a council meeting [council in Greek is simvoulío]. Apostolos asks her what 'emvolío' [vaccine] means [the two words sound very similar]. She laughs and tells him, "Not emvolío, simvoulío." Apostolos keeps on asking her what it means but she does not answer. When I ask her, "Why don't you explain to him?", she says, "He will not understand anyway." When I ask her, "How do you know?", she says, "I know it. Everybody knows it." Finally, she did explain to him. Apostolos asked some further questions, such as what they are talking about now, and he seemed to understand everything and he also calmed down. He did not cause any problems, as he was just looking at them. The girl seemed surprised by his attitude and she smiled at him in the end before she went back into the classroom.'*

Here, it seems that the girl had a very particular meaning assigned to Apostolos. When she said that Apostolos would not understand and I asked her how she knows this, it is interesting that she did not have a concrete explanation to give me. She used the fact that others, in fact everyone, knew that he would not understand. It seems therefore, that her interactions with other children, and possibly adults, were determinant in coming to define this particular child as not being able to understand. However, the interaction she had with that particular child made her question her own assumptions about him. So, it seems that interactions with children acted in two ways, either to reinforce existing meanings or to challenge them.

Particular patterns of behaviour on the part of children were also influencing the way other children were thinking about them and consequently acting towards them. For instance, aggressive behaviour is a kind of behaviour that is very easily identified by children and used as an excuse for not mixing with particular pupils, and in some cases for marginalising these children.

#### *The adults in the school*

For the purposes of analysis, I consider the adults in the particular school in three separate groups: the teachers, the 'school escorts' and the special education teacher.

*Teachers.* Teachers appeared to influence children in two ways: (1) through the practices they were using on the one hand, and (2) through their actual words on the other hand, which, it can be argued, were also part of their practices.

However, as teachers' actual words were found to have a particular effect on their own, I decided to analyse each of these considerations separately.

Teachers' attitudes were often reflected in the practices they were using. Several practices were observed in the classrooms and then discussed in the interviews with children. Those that were identified as particularly influential in terms of how children came to construct meanings about their classmates were seating arrangements, the use of the star charts and rewards, the ways in which roles were assigned to children, and the assessment procedures used.

I will use an example for the seating arrangements. In most of the classrooms, desks were placed in rows with children sitting in pairs, except for two classrooms that had the children sitting in groups. However, in both cases there were children who were sitting at a desk on their own, remote from other children. As the teachers explained, this was because most of the time these children were misbehaving, or they would not let the other children pay attention.

When children were asked why they thought these children were sitting on their own, in most cases it was stated that it was the teacher's decision. In explaining this, children did say that their teacher had some children sitting on their own because they were naughty, or because they found it hard to cooperate with other children, or because the others did not want to sit with them for those reasons, or even because there were not enough children in the classroom.

The following example is from an interview with a 10-year-old girl (Elena), and illustrates the effect that the seating arrangements had in constructing certain understandings about Andreas:

*'The teacher told us to sit with whomever we want, and we did that. And some . . . , because Andreas sits alone at the back, they don't play with him and they make fun of him sometimes . . . , and the teacher did not tell us where to sit, because before he used to tell us and now he told us to sit as we want, and that pupil did not go anywhere because nobody told him to sit with him, although there were seats and he sat on his own at the back.' (Elena)*

Here it can be inferred that children came to define Andreas as someone who is naughty and, therefore, with whom they did not want to sit. This was something that they said in their interviews as well. This incident was also confirmed by Andreas. The fact that the teacher previously had him sitting on his own did not provide other children with the opportunity to work with him and possibly led others to certain understandings about him, and therefore act accordingly towards him.

However, seating arrangements could be used as a way to better include children that might experience marginalisation.

For example, if teachers had a child who was experiencing marginalisation sitting with other children, in pairs or in groups, and of course if the right opportunities for cooperation were given, then that particular child might have been more accepted by his or her peers. In this sense, the child would have been connected with the wider community of the classroom (Corbett & Norwich, 1999) and would have felt more included.

Teachers' actual words were also found to be very influential for children's constructions of meanings about other children. So, for instance, when children were asked how they know if somebody was a good or weak student, the answer was at most times because the child has his or her hands up or down when the teacher asks questions, or because he or she gets high or low grades in their tests, or because the teacher tells them so. The following example is an extract from an interview with a 9-year-old boy (Michalis):

*'... The weak ones, the teacher does not ask them to talk too much, because she knows... Like today for example, Poupou, she is a weak student, the teacher was not asking her to talk, she had her hand up, [the teacher] would not ask her to talk because she told her, "You will stand up and come to the board and look at the equation and then the equation will look back at you too."' (Michalis)*

In a way, this boy had a meaning assigned to this girl as being a weak student, which was also reinforced by the way the teacher treated her, and especially by the strong language that she used towards that child. Ainscow (1999) stresses the effect that 'throw away' comments by teachers in the classrooms can have on pupils' views of themselves as learners. From this study, it is evident that not only such comments affect the way children view themselves, but also how they are viewed by others as well.

'School escorts'. 'School escorts' is the exact translation of the term used in Cyprus for teaching assistants, who are employed to work with particular children. The practice of having 'school escorts' is relatively new for schools in Cyprus. In the particular school, two of them were employed for two particular children, Apostolos and Yianna 2. The role of escorts, as observed and also explained by the teachers and children themselves, was that of looking after the particular children.

Children, both in the classes where these children were attending and from other classrooms, observed this 'looking after' role. In addition, children viewed the 'school escorts' as being the friend of the particular child. As one 6-year-old boy told me:

*Interviewer Does Yianna 2 have friends?  
Nikos Yes.  
Interviewer Who are her friends?  
Nikos I don't remember the name.  
The lady who is looking after her.*

More importantly, viewing the lady as a friend of the particular girl might have acted as a barrier to her socialisation. In the next incident, how the presence of the school escort was interfering between children's communication can be seen:

*'Yianna 2 is in the playground with her "school escort" next to her. She eats her sandwich in the sunshine. A group of girls from the same classroom are standing very close eating their sandwiches as well. At some point they approach the "school escort" and talk to her. I see them pointing at Yianna, the "school escort" asks her something and she tells them. But they do not address any question to her directly.'*

This is rather interesting, because Yianna 2 was in a position to talk and communicate well with children, as she was doing with her 'school escort'. However, the girls never chose to talk to her directly but rather talked to her assistant. This finding is consistent with findings from research conducted by the University of Cyprus (2003), which suggest that the 'school escort' is considered by other children as appropriate company for the child whom she is 'looking after', and in addition, other children do not think that it is necessary to mingle with those particular children.

*The special education teacher.* The special education teacher was responsible for educating separately the seven children in the school that were defined as having 'special needs' and, therefore, were seen to require special education. This practice of working separately with those children is the policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

What was more important though, in terms of how the children in the school perceived her and the children she was working with, was the way she behaved towards the children defined as having 'special needs'. For example, many times she used to come into the classrooms to take out the child she was going to work with. The following example is from a language lesson in the C2 classroom (9-year-old children):

*'Children are asked by the teacher to read aloud the passage they had. Sotiris reads aloud and when he finishes, a girl says to the teacher, "Sir, Sotiris knows how to read!" "Well done Sotiris," she tells him. Sotiris smiles. At that time the special education teacher comes into the classroom. Sotiris pretends that he hasn't seen her. His teacher tells him, "Come on, Sotiris. Come on!" Sotiris puts his head on the desk, ignoring both teachers. The special education teacher goes there and tells him "Come on" in a rather strict way. He keeps on ignoring her. In the end, she pulls him by his shoulder and he stands up, gets his things and goes out of the classroom with her.'*

What are children likely to think about this child and what he is doing in the special education classroom? What are

they likely to think about his unwillingness to go to that classroom? And why does the special education teacher have to go into his classroom, interrupt the lesson, and ask him to leave in such an obvious way?

*Parents.* Children also mentioned their parents in the interviews. However, this was an area which could not be further explored as parents were not there at school and therefore did not comprise part of the school community as such.

#### *The structures*

Two main themes relating to the structures of the educational system emerged from the conversations with children. These had to do with the first-year class repetition policy and the segregated special needs provision.

*First-year class repetition.* According to the regulations in Cyprus, children can only repeat the first year at the primary school, provided that the parents of the child give their consent. There were a number of children who repeated the first year, and all of those were identified as possibly experiencing marginalisation. Children from both their classes (the first year they were attending school and the second year as well) knew that the child was repeating classes and referred to this. Interestingly enough, some children viewed class repetition as a way of punishment for not behaving well, as one 9-year-old girl (Julia) told me:

*'We have someone who laughs all the time, he is shouting at the teacher and he speaks badly to her, and he does this in all the lessons and the teachers should do something about this. Let's say to leave him in the same class [meaning class repetition] or to send him away from the school, like they did with another classmate.' (Julia)*

It could be argued, therefore, that some children might see this class repetition practice as a way of punishing particular children. It also seemed that class repetition acted as a stigma on these particular children. More importantly, it acted negatively in terms of constructing meanings of oneself.

*Segregated special education provision.* The provision in the special education classroom seemed to affect the way that other children viewed children who were defined as having 'special needs' and were receiving this kind of support. What was evident was that children were not clear why their classmates were leaving their classrooms. In most cases, they were not told why some children had to leave their classrooms. This 'silence' on the part of the teachers might have acted negatively, because children had to make their own judgements based on what they saw. For instance, based on their observations of the physical environment of the special education classroom, some children were led to specific understandings. In a conversation with two children from Year 3, they told me that they knew that they are doing easy work in that classroom, because they saw the displays with numbers from 1 to 10. Of course, the fact that in this

classroom children from different classes, and at different levels of attainment are taught, makes it inevitable that the displays will be diverse, ranging from the numbers that the girls commented on to more complicated displays. Also, the fact that other children never really visited this classroom but could only see part of it when they were passing by tended to result in misconceptions.

From what children said, it was clear that they thought that these children had to go to that classroom because they were not doing well academically, and therefore, had to receive help in specific areas. In this sense, they came to define children who were attending the special education classroom as the ones who needed help because they could not do well in the classroom.

#### *The existing cultures or differences from the 'norm' in the school*

There was some evidence that children saw some of their classmates as being different from the 'norm'. What was considered to be the 'norm', however, was influenced by factors in the wider context of Cyprus, as well as within the particular context.

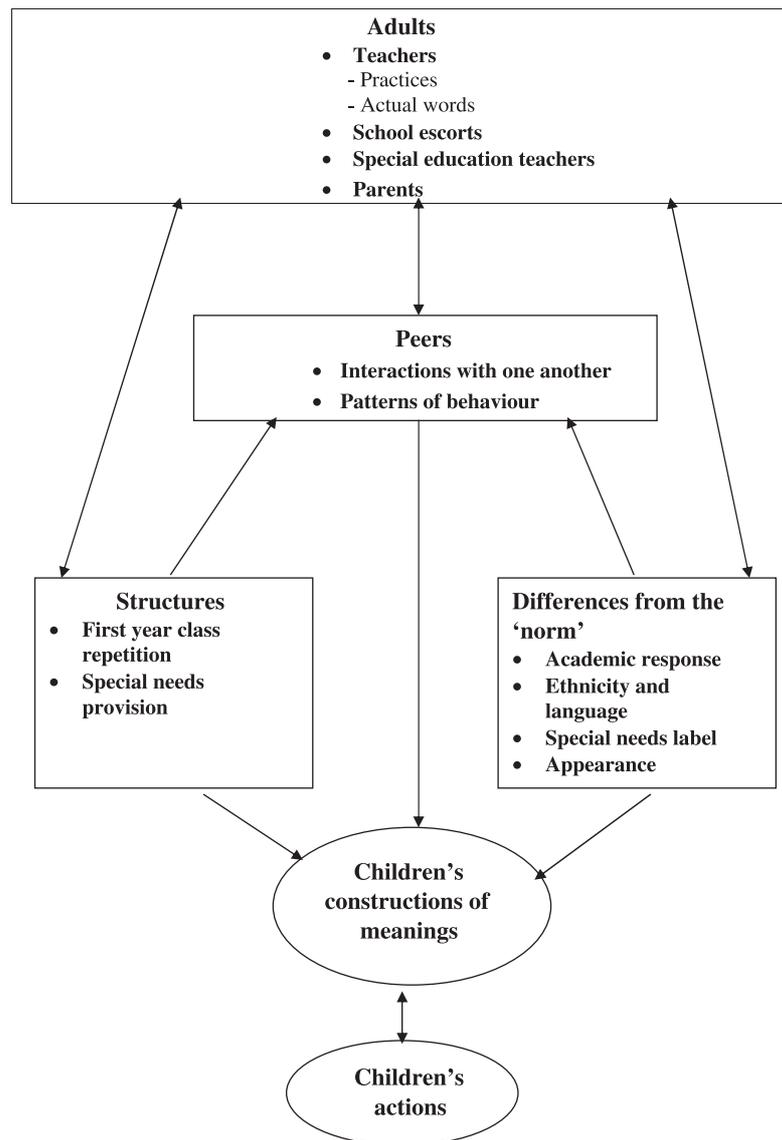
Generally speaking, the 'norm' for children who were attending the school was thought to be white Greek Cypriot children, having Greek as their first language. It seemed that whoever deviated from this description was thought to be in some way different and was therefore under scrutiny by other children.

In the particular school, the 'norm' was found to be related to four different sets of characteristics. These were (1) a child's academic response, (2) the ethnicity and the language that a child was speaking, (3) whether a child was defined by the system as having 'special needs', and (4) a child's appearance.

I will use an example for the 'special needs' label. It was interesting that children did use this term, and often the 'special needs' label was used by children in a negative way. For instance, Michalis, a 7-year-old boy, told me:

- Michalis*      *Apostolos has special needs, he doesn't come to school.*
- Interviewer*      *What does 'special needs' mean to you, could you explain this to me?*
- Michalis*      *It means, like let's say, he cannot speak well.*
- Interviewer*      *How do you know this, that Apostolos has special needs?*
- Michalis*      *I understand it, from his stupidity.*
- Interviewer*      *How? What did he do?*
- Michalis*      *I understand it, because if a boy were well, he wouldn't behave like that. Would he do like Apostolos? Would he swear like that? Even to the teachers?*

Consequently special needs was interpreted in terms of what a child could not do well, or from the particular way

**Figure 1: Relations between the different factors**

that this child was behaving. The negative word 'stupidity' is also mentioned. Other children used similar words.

In addition, some children associated children defined as having special needs with medical conditions as, for instance, when a boy was asked why two of his classmates (both of whom had learning difficulties) go to the special education classroom he said:

*'They have something, an illness and they cannot read or write well and they go there and work.'*

Nevertheless, apart from the girl with cerebral palsy, the rest of the children that received special education had no apparent medical condition. Relating 'special needs' with medical conditions and illness is associated with the medical model of viewing special needs by which individuals are defined by their deficits rather than by external factors (Fulcher, 1989), and therefore additional

support is what is thought to be essential. Apart from this, it seems that in a child's mind this might also be viewed as something to be avoided in order not to get the 'illness'. This idea was not examined any further in this study but is an area which needs to be explored in future research.

### **Finding the connections**

The factors analysed above did not stand in isolation but were found to be interconnected. The interrelationships between those factors are presented in Figure 1, where the complexities leading to children's constructions of meanings are illustrated.

As can be seen, the four factors influencing the way children constructed meanings about others, were affecting each other and overlapping. The next example, an extract from an interview with a 12-year-old boy (Ahilleos), is indicative of the relationship between different factors:

- Interviewer* Do children make fun of other children in the classroom?
- Ahilleos* Yes.
- Interviewer* Why?
- Ahilleos* Because the child is saying something outrageous.
- Interviewer* Do they always make fun of the same child?
- Ahilleos* It is one child that they make fun of every time.
- Interviewer* What's the reason for making fun of that particular child?
- Ahilleos* Because he is from Pontos, Pontios (someone with Greek origins but from a country of the ex-Soviet Union Republic), and because he doesn't understand, he doesn't speak Greek well.
- Interviewer* I see and not because he says something outrageous.
- Ahilleos* No, and the other time the teacher asked him, just for fun, 'What is it – day or night?' and he answered night and we all laughed.
- Interviewer* How do you think that this child feels when the others laugh?
- Ahilleos* I think he is hurt.
- Interviewer* But some keep on doing it.
- Ahilleos* Yes.
- Interviewer* Because you told me that the teacher asked him if it was day or night, why did he ask him this?
- Ahilleos* Because he was not paying attention and suddenly he told [asked] him that.

This example was chosen because I believe it clearly shows the effect that ethnicity and the fact that the child was not speaking Greek well had on Ahilleos in coming to construct certain meanings about his classmate (Achtenistos). In addition, the teacher's actual words came to reinforce this meaning. Furthermore, the teacher's practice of having that boy sitting on his own also had an effect on how others viewed him. In particular, Ahilleos in his interview told me that the particular boy was sitting on his own in the classroom because he was annoying his partner. Furthermore, in my observations in that classroom I saw children smiling at each other many times, either trying not to laugh or laughing, whenever that boy was replying to the teacher's questions, regardless of what he was saying. So, children's interactions interfered as well. Therefore, as can be seen, it was not one factor in itself that led to the creation of particular meanings towards some children but rather the combination of factors and the effect that one factor had on the others. In a sense, it was as if one factor was adding to the other, and in the end the result was to define somebody as an 'outsider'.

This explanation is supported by the fact that not all children in the school who were from other countries appeared to experience marginalisation. Although this did happen for many children, it was not the case for all

children who were not Greek Cypriots in origin. Interestingly enough, this did happen in relation to children who were defined as having 'special needs'. All these children were identified as possibly experiencing marginalisation. It seems, therefore, that the label in itself was strong enough to lead to the creation of certain meanings.

### Discussion – implications for inclusive education

Understanding the way children construct meanings about other children, and especially those children who might experience marginalisation within a school setting, can have implications for the implementation of inclusive education. In other words, following symbolic interactionists' view that people act on the basis of the meanings they hold for others, it seems to be important to identify those factors that might lead to the creation of certain meanings about particular children in school contexts. As was found in this study, in the particular school, the factors did not stand in isolation but were rather interweaving with one another.

Looking at Figure 1, it can be noted that those who were in a position to have an effect on all the other factors were the adults, and in particular the teachers. They were the ones who could either reinforce or give less emphasis on the norms and on the school's structures and determine to an extent the nature of children's interactions. Going back to Bogdan and Taylor's (1992) 'social construction of humanness' in relation to disability, and extending it in relation to the way children constructed meanings about other children, and especially those who were experiencing marginalisation, it could be argued that data gathered from this study do not confirm Bogdan and Taylor's argument, but neither do they reject it. In other words, it was not found that the nature of the relationship between children was the most important factor for coming to define other children, and certainly it was not the only factor. Of course, this does not suggest that in the specific context, the label was more powerful than relationships. It could be that the opportunities for children to interact and create relationships with one another were not provided at the particular school to a satisfactory extent perhaps. In this sense, the characteristics of the children and of the group that they belonged to prevailed over the nature of their relationships with other children, because such relationships did not exist at all in many cases. In a way, understandings gained through this study emphasise both the power of a label, given that one of the factors identified was difference from the norm, as well as the importance of social interactions in the creation of such labels or meanings.

Implications of the study could be used for the creation of effective inclusive environments in schools. In particular, as stated above, the teachers were found to have a key role in children's constructions of meanings about other children, and especially those who experience marginalisation, and consequently for the creation of effective inclusive classrooms. Therefore, if teachers act in such ways so as to control the other factors, then we might move towards greater inclusive school settings. For instance, by giving

students opportunities to work together in the classroom and therefore facilitating the interaction between them, or by helping students to clarify some misconceptions they might hold about the notion of special needs might be determinant factors in the process of successfully implementing inclusive education.

### Final thoughts

Ainscow and Kaplan (2005) argue that the use of students' views can be a powerful lever for change within schools. They argue that 'the perspectives of students [like the perspectives of any other members of a school community] need to be understood beyond literal interpretations, to be engaged with and discussed' (p. 113). However, they also stress the challenges that emerge as a result of listening to the voices of different people. This study concludes that children's voices should be used not only as a strategy for better understanding inclusion, and for the creation of effective inclusive environments, but also more importantly these voices should be seen as an essential element within the process of developing inclusive practices.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Overseas Research Students (ORS) Awards Scheme and the University of Manchester for providing me with financial support to conduct this research.

### Address for correspondence

Kyriaki Messiou,  
Centre for Educational Studies,  
Room 349,  
Wilberforce Building,  
University of Hull,  
Cottingham Road,  
Hull HU6 7RX,  
UK.  
Email: k.messiou@hull.ac.uk.

### References

- Ainscow, M. (1999) *Understanding the Development of Inclusive Schools*. London: Falmer Press.
- Ainscow, M. (2000) 'Profile.' In P. Clough & J. Corbett (eds), *Theories of Inclusive Education*, pp. 39–42. London: Paul Chapman.
- Ainscow, M. & Kaplan, I. (2005) 'Using evidence to encourage inclusive school development: possibilities and challenges.' *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 29 (2), pp. 106–16.
- Ainscow, M., Booth, T. & Dyson, A. (1999) 'Inclusion and exclusion in schools: listening to some hidden voices.' In K. Ballard (ed.), *Inclusive Education: International Voices on Disability and Justice*, pp. 139–51. London: Falmer Press.
- Allan, J. (1999) *Actively Seeking Inclusion*. London: Falmer Press.
- Barton, L. (1997) 'Inclusive education: romantic, subversive or realistic?' *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1 (3), pp. 231–42.
- Becker, H. (1973) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. London: Collier Macmillan.
- Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bogdan, R. & Taylor, S. J. (1992) 'The social construction of humanness: relationships with severely disabled people.' In P. M. Ferguson, D. L. Ferguson & S. J. Taylor (eds), *Interpreting Disability: A Qualitative Reader*, pp. 275–94. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Christensen, P. & James, A. (2000) 'Introduction: researching children and childhood: cultures of communication.' In P. Christensen & A. James (eds), *Research with Children – Perspectives and Practices*, pp. 1–8. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Clough, P. & Barton, L. (1995) *Making Difficulties: Research and the Construction of SEN*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Corbett, J. & Norwich, B. (1999) 'Learners with special educational needs.' In P. Mortimore (ed.), *Understanding Pedagogy and Its Impact on Learning*, pp. 115–36. London: Paul Chapman.
- Creswell, J. W. & Miller, D. L. (2000) 'Determining validity in qualitative inquiry.' *Theory Into Practice*, 39 (3), pp. 124–30.
- Davies, L. (2000) 'Researching democratic understanding in primary school.' *Research in Education*, 61, pp. 39–48.
- Fielding, M. (2001) 'Students as radical agents of change.' *Journal of Educational Change*, 2 (2), pp. 123–41.
- Fulcher, G. (1989) *Disabling Policies? A Comparative Approach to Education Policy and Disability*. London: Falmer Press.
- Harden, J., Scott, S., Backett-Milburn, K. & Jackson, S. (2000) 'Can't talk, won't talk? Methodological issues in researching children.' *Sociological Research Online*, 5 (2). <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/2/harden.html>> (accessed 24 January 2003).
- James, A., Jenks, C. & Prout, A. (1998) *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lewis, A. (1995) *Children's Understandings of Disability*. London: Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage.
- Mayall, B. (2001) 'Conversations with children: working with generational issues.' In P. Christensen & A. James (eds), *Research with Children – Perspectives and Practices*, pp. 120–35. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

- Messiou, K. (2002) 'Marginalisation in primary schools: listening to children's voices.' *Support for Learning*, 17 (3), pp. 117–21.
- Messiou, K. (2003) *Conversations with Children: A Pathway towards Understanding Marginalisation and Inclusive Education*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester.
- Messiou, K. (2006) 'Conversations with children: making sense of marginalisation in primary school settings.' *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 21 (1), pp. 39–54.
- Mills, R. (2000) 'Perspectives of childhood.' In J. Mills & R. Mills (eds), *Childhood Studies: A Reader in Perspectives of Childhood*, pp. 7–38. London: Routledge.
- Mordal, K. N. & Stromstad, M. (1998) 'Norway: adapted education for all?' In T. Booth & M. Ainscow (eds), *From Them to Us*, pp. 101–17. London: Routledge.
- Pilcher, J. & Wagg, S. (1996) 'Introduction: Thatcher's children?' In J. Pilcher & S. Wagg (eds), *Thatcher's Children? Politics, Childhood and Society in the 1980s and 1990s*, pp. 1–7. London: Falmer Press.
- Prout, A. (2002) 'Researching children as social actors: an introduction to the children 5–16 programme.' *Children and Society*, 16 (2), pp. 67–76.
- Prout, A. & James, A. (1990) 'Introduction.' In A. James & A. Prout (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, pp. 1–6. London: Falmer Press.
- Rose, R. & Shevlin, M. (2004) 'Encouraging voices: listening to young people who have been marginalised.' *Support for Learning*, 19 (4), pp. 155–61.
- Rudduck, J., Chaplain, R. & Wallace, G. (1996) 'Introduction: pupil voices and school improvement.' In J. Rudduck, R. Chaplain & G. Wallace (eds), *School Improvement – What Can Pupils Tell Us?*, pp. 1–16. London: David Fulton.
- Sammons, P. (1989) 'Ethical issues and statistical work.' In R. G. Burgess (ed.), *The Ethics of Educational Research*, pp. 31–59. London: Falmer Press.
- United Nations (UN) (1989) *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: UN.
- University of Cyprus (2003) 'The "special needs" of the educational system.' *Phileleftheros Newspaper*, 22 October 2003.
- Vlachou, A. D. (1997) *Struggles for Inclusive Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.