

Parental associations and education politics regarding disability: the case of Cyprus

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This paper is about parental associations and their impact on educational developments regarding the education of disabled children in Cyprus. It mainly comments upon parents' conceptualisations of disabled children's rights which guided their responses to education politics. The historical and interpretative nature of this paper is achieved by building arguments through interpreting qualitative data covering the period 1970-2007. Four periods associated with important developments were identified to facilitate understanding of parental involvement in politics: early forms of parental mobilization, parents' groups acting as 'non-pressure' groups, parental power through networking and resolving issues of identity and power between parents' pressure groups. The paper ends with a critical discussion of parental involvement in education politics in relation to the nature of parents' associations which constitute this evolving pressure group.

Introduction

In the light of an increasing appreciation of parental involvement regarding disability related educational issues (Riddell, Brown and Duffield, 1994; Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997), parents' role in the developing legislative context of inclusive education is now of interest (Tisdall and Riddell, 2006). In the context of inclusion, the medical and normalising assumptions embedded in segregation and integration are marginalized, theoretically leaving the 'experts' with less power to determine disabled children's future. Many definitions of inclusive education have been advanced, but what actually differentiates integration from inclusion is that inclusion is about the right of all children to full, and not partial, participation in education (Florian, 1998). Parallel to Inclusive Education theories, theories in Disability Studies emphasised the social aspects of disability (Oliver, 1990), while the psycho-emotional dimension of impairment (Thomas, 1999) and the impact of history, culture and language to the experience of disability (Corker and Shakespeare, 2002) were also recognised.

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Within this rich theoretical context, parents' role in shaping their disabled children's every-day lives and influencing developments at political level can be conceptualised through different angles. As far as the education of disabled children is concerned, parents are now expected to be among the protagonists of the road to inclusion. Their role is not merely restricted in supporting the education of their children. They are now expected to be alert in on-going developments regarding education in order to safeguard fundamental rights and place prospective political changes in the appropriate philosophical and theoretical context.

Parents' involvement in educational developments is actually one type of parental advocacy. Prior to reaching this level of involvement, parents exert influence through the level of economic and practical support they are able to offer, as well as through the socialization in which families are engaged (Dee, 2006). Parental involvement in educational provision is another important type of parental advocacy. Lewis (1993) informs us that in the United Kingdom, parents have the right to influence decisions in four aspects of educational provision: formal educational assessment, appeals, non-statemented special provision, and participation or otherwise in the curriculum.

Parental involvement can be quite powerful when it comes to decision-making about young people's choices in further education and employment. In many cases, and particularly in cases of young people with learning difficulties, parental choices may supersede their children's views (Dee, 2006). In this context, the extent to which parents should be able to define their children's personal and social lives in the future is an issue. A fundamental question would be: Are parents adequately equipped to acknowledge their delicate role as advocates and participate in a continuous struggle for change as equal partners to other stakeholders, such as politicians, ministry officers, teachers and experts? A brief account of parental involvement in educational developments so far can help shape a preliminary answer to the question posed here.

In Cyprus, parents (of disabled and non-disabled children) have a relatively short history of substantial involvement in educational developments. The social, political and historical context of Cyprus explains their belated engagement in lobbying the state for educational improvement. The Cypriot family has undergone a structural shift, which followed the country's shift in politics and economy, and had an impact in the perceived role of education (Symeonidou, 2005). Cyprus unsteady political past (Turkish occupation 1571-1878 and British colonialism 1878-1960) justifies Greek-Cypriots' strong bonds with the Orthodox Christian Church that was seen as the medium towards national, cultural and linguistic survival. Before Cyprus became an independent republic in 1960, a standard family would have many members. People would earn their living through cultivation and farming. As children helped their parents in the fields, schooling was a secondary activity. Most children left primary school before they reached the last grade, as a result of their parents' instigations. Those who managed to graduate from high school were a minority. Young adults, usually males, who managed to get university education, mostly in Greece, were even fewer (Argyrou, 1996). After Cyprus gained independence and especially, after the 1974 invasion, Cyprus economy changed. The loss of agricultural land favoured light industry and services. Families became smaller; a standard family would have two children. Medium and high socio-economic class parents, increasingly value education as they see it as a means towards well-paid, respectful employment. Nowadays, almost all children graduate from high school and more and more youngsters pursue academic studies either in the University of Cyprus or in other universities, preferably in Greece, the U.K. and the U.S.A.

Considering the particularities of the Cypriot context, parental involvement in educational issues emerged in co-operation with teachers, a highly respected group of professionals at the time. Polydorou in Phtiaka (1999) informs us that between the late 1940s and the 1950s, Parents Teachers Associations flourished in Cyprus, having as a main goal the provision of free milk, food and clothes to poor children. Later, parents functioned without teachers' assistance through Parental Associations (PAs), aiming to secure better provision at school level. Today, PAs function collectively at political level, through federations and confederations. Arguably, their goals have extended from catering for poor children, to supporting the school financially (securing secretarial services or equipment for school) and more importantly, to representing parents in consultation with the state.

Although local research records promising examples of constructive teacher-parent partnership as far as parents of non-disabled children are concerned (Symeou, 2006), the case differs significantly when it comes to partnerships between disabled children parents' and the stakeholders involved in the education of their children (Phtiaka, 2001). Unequal power relationships among parents and disability experts act as a barrier for encouraging partnership in equal terms. However, this is not an exclusive feature of Cyprus. Riddell *et al.* (1994) report that relevant studies conducted in the United Kingdom provide evidence to suggest that the ideal of parental partnership is a feature more in rhetoric than reality. Often, the idea of partnership is increasingly used by professionals to justify mechanisms which seek to control the behaviour of parents and their children (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997).

In Cyprus, parents of disabled children have been players in the political game of education ever since it started, although their status has changed over the years. At the beginning they gratefully accepted anything the state and charitable initiatives would offer, i.e. special schools for the education of disabled children (1929 – 1979), the segregating 1979 Special Education Act (N.47/79) and experts' superiority. After a long period of separatist education, parents came across the idea of integration developed in Western countries, and they reluctantly began to advocate for changes in the education system. Alongside all the stakeholders in this process of change, parents witnessed important developments: an influential report suggesting the urgent need to turn towards integration (Constandinides, 1992), a law securing

the integration of children with hearing impairments (N.61(I)93), and a long consultation process (1995-1998) on subsequent drafts of legislation about integration (Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2002), until the long-desired Integration of Children with Special Needs Act arrived in 1999 (N.113(I)/99). Parents' views about the implementation of the new law were recently recorded in an evaluation report, prepared for the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture (Phtiaka, Michaelidou, Tsouris and Vlami, 2005). According to the report, although parents strongly express their dissatisfaction with the way integration is implemented, at the same time they are convinced that integration, and not segregation, should be the only option for the education of their children. Despite their frustration, parents are still engaged in the process of securing better education for their children and it should be expected that they will be present in forthcoming developments.

Methodology

This paper reports on research findings regarding the involvement of parental associations in education policy developments regarding disabled children in Cyprus. The conceptualisation of this study was guided by the assumptions underpinning hermeneutics, a paradigm falling under the umbrella of interpretive approaches. As the analysis entails interpretation of parental involvement in key-stages of the process, parents' role is contextualized and significant actions and decisions that acted as turning points in parental struggles are pointed out. Qualitative data covering the period 1970-2007 was used for the purposes of this paper. Part of the data was collected for a larger research project about disability and the disability movement in Cyprus (Symeonidou, 2005). Other primary sources were sought to cover the period after the aforementioned research project was completed. The primary sources used in this paper are only a small part of the large archive of newspaper articles about disability issues, which emerged for the research project. The archive comprised thousands of articles from all Cypriot newspapers published in the periodical *Anapirikon Vima* (1970-1974), newspaper *Phileleftheros* (1974-1989), newspaper *Simerini* (1990-1998) and all Cypriot newspapers (1999-2007). A justification of the period covered by each source can be found in Symeonidou (2005). Written responses of PAs to consultation documents discussed in the Parliament were kindly disclosed by the Cyprus Parliament Archives' Department. The Pancyprian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs and the Cyprus Confederation of Disabled People's Organizations kindly provided

access to important documents and minutes respectively.

It is particularly important to comment on the terminology used in this paper. Although Cyprus has imported the British term 'children with special needs' which is still unquestionably used, in this paper the term 'disabled children' is used. This decision was taken in the light of critiques regarding the oppressive assumptions hidden in 'special needs' (Corbett, 1996), and the expressed preference of the international disability movement about the term disabled people (Oliver, 1990). In some parts of the paper, language that is considered outdated or oppressive is used (i.e. mentally retarded children); albeit this is the result of direct translation of texts that originally appear in Greek, indicating local linguistic specificities.

In the sections that follow, four periods associated with parental involvement and important developments are analysed: early forms of parental mobilization, parents' groups acting as 'non-pressure' groups, parental power through networking and resolving issues of identity and power between parents' pressure groups.

Early forms of parental mobilization

In Cyprus, the recorded history of special education goes back in 1929, when the School for the Blind was founded by the wife of the British governor of Cyprus at the time. The period 1929-1979 was marked by the gradual establishment of special schools (Phtiaka, 2006a). During this period, special schools were ran by a Board of Governors, following their own set of rules and regulations, and working in competition with other special schools and institutions (Phtiaka, 2006a). Far from taking on the nature of a movement, parents' first associations were scattered across Cyprus. They were also special school based, representing parents whose children attended the same special school, but had different types of impairments. PAs were initially interested in fund-raising activities that would help them build special schools or support the existing ones.

Documentary evidence suggests that Nicosia Special School Parents' Association was one of the first PAs in Cyprus, formed in 1972 (Nicosia Special School Parents' Association, 1979, October 11). At the time, the particular special school did not function in a special school setting. It was spread in different mainstream schools which sheltered its special classes. The appointed headmaster was travelling on a daily basis to supervise the functioning of the 'school'. Although this could be characterised as an early form of integration, parents strongly opposed to this settlement and focussed on collecting all the

necessary funds for building the long desired special school:

The General Board of Nicosia Special School Parents' Association announces its effort to establish a Special Fund in order to assist the Ministry of Education to its efforts to build an appropriate building for the School, and calls people to make donations. ('Appeal for Donations for Building School', 1976, February 10, p. 3)

In 1977, the Pancyprian Association for Mentally Retarded People was formed in Limassol. It was a voluntary association aiming to inform society about people with learning difficulties and lobby the state for improvements in educational provision. Primary data indicates that this association was a mixture of parents' representing special school associations, non-disabled people representing special schools' Board of Governors, and special school staff ('Pancyprian Association...', 1977, March 29). The synthesis of the first General Board of the association denotes that parents were not expected to lead this association. The chair was Lia Tseriotou, a high profile lady, and the vice president was Amerikos Argiriou, a doctor.

The presence of popular personalities and doctors in associations that were supposed to represent parents was a factor against the empowerment of parents. Parents were forced to believe that having a 'mentally retarded' child in the family was a source of stress for parents and catastrophic for non-disabled siblings. Families saw special schools as a convenient setting for disabled children; a setting that would loosen up parents and minimize disabled children's interaction with their non-disabled siblings. In his speech, the vice-president of the Pancyprian Association for Mentally Retarded People, Dr Argiriou (1978, June 9) emphasized the need for a special institution for 'mentally retarded' children and adults. Bearing the status of a doctor, he presented a series of arguments to suggest that it is impossible for a number of families to live with 'severely retarded' children and he concluded by stating:

You will see that the least we will achieve with the institutionalised shelter is a place for these children to live. More importantly, we will have achieved to protect their healthy siblings, to have tranquillity in their family and to save our fellow citizens.

At this stage, parents accepted this type of statements and when given the opportunity, they expressed themselves in a similar tone (i.e. Theofilou, 1979, June 7).

Parents' groups acting as 'non-pressure' groups

By late 1978, parents were convinced that segregation was the most appropriate response for disabled children and their families. PAs were constantly struggling to secure the necessary funds for building special schools and hoped for additional financial contribution on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Although there was no relevant policy, a total of eight special schools functioned at the time (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1979, February 23). However, as special schools were founded as a result of private initiative and had their own governing bodies and rules, the Ministry of Education and Culture eventually considered that its authority was restricted.

Thus, in December 1978, the Ministers' Council authorized the Ministry of Education to prepare a White Paper for Special Education, submit it to the Parliament, and 'promote its passing as soon as possible' (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1978, November 23). According to the archives kept in the Parliament, there were three consultation meetings (December 1978, March 1979 and April 1979), prior the passing of the Special Education Act in June 1979. In brief, the law passed with minor amendments, six months after it was submitted in the Parliament. Twist of fate, or twist of politics, the first Special Education Act passed during the International Year for the Child. This served as a political tool for the state which advertised the new law in four special education conferences organized by the National Committee for the International Year for the Child throughout 1979 ('Four conferences...', 1979, May 22).

According to the invitation letter sent prior to the first consultation meeting (Cyprus Parliament, 1978, December 19), the bodies invited to discuss the White Paper were the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, the teachers' union and four PAs: Pancyprian Association for Mentally Retarded People, Nicosia Special School Parents' Association, St Loukas Special School Parents' Association and Vocational School Archbishop Makarios III Parents' Association.

The official report that refers to the consultation meeting held on December 21st (Cyprus Parliament, 1979, March 19) suggests that PAs were generally satisfied with the White Paper:

Parents' representatives who participated in the Committee for the discussion of the White Paper expressed their satisfaction for the proposed special legislation that will propose arrangements about issues regarding special educational provision for mentally retarded children. They appeared optimistic about the possibility that the government will soon have under its control all the private special schools.

Parental satisfaction is also recorded in the minutes kept during this meeting (Cyprus Parliament, 1979, January 10).

Overall, parents appeared easy-going and grateful during the consultation process. No consultation documents were submitted in the Parliament indicating detailed suggestions or protest. No relevant articles were recorded in daily newspapers either. Parents were satisfied with the proposed legislation because it would legitimate separatist education that was already taking place and secure their children in separate establishment.

Importantly, this period, a group of parents co-operated with the Pancyprian Organization for the Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PORDP), a collective organization established in 1966 to promote disabled people's interests. It was believed to be an umbrella organization comprising groups of disabled people with different types of impairments, albeit ran by non-disabled distinguished figures of the Greek-Cypriot society. Due to the close relationship between PORDP's non-disabled leader and politician Petros Stylianou with the government, disabled people were much benefited by the activities of the organization in terms of securing social policy developments (Symeonidou, 2005). Parents joined PORDP in 1978-1979, possibly because they saw it as a means in promoting their goals more easily (PORDP's action, 1978, October-December; PORDP's action, 1979, April-June). A careful triangulation of primary sources reveals that parents who were the leading figures of special schools' PAs also joined the board of PORDP's parental sub-group (PORDP's action, 1979, July-December).

Not surprisingly, PORDP's philosophy was restricted in the medical and charity models. Thus, it contributed in the construction of stereotypes for disabled people by using oppressive rhetoric, and by encouraging fundraising for building different types of segregating settings such as institutions and medical centres (Symeonidou, 2005). Consequently, parents continued to promote fundraising for building

special schools, but this time through PORDP (PORDP's action, 1979, July-December).

Parental power through networking

In 1981, Anthoula Theofilou strongly encouraged all parents of children with learning difficulties to join forces in order to form a powerful pancyprian association. Her vision is recorded in a powerful letter published in a daily newspaper (Theofilou, 1981, April 22). Her letter had a repercussion in another association operating in Larnaca and Famagusta, whose chair also sent a letter in the newspaper to express his agreement with Theofilou's arguments (Hatzimichael, 1981, May 10). The outcome of Theofilou's efforts was the formation of the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Mentally Retarded People in 1982.

The association established co-operation with the non-disabled leader of PORDP, Petros Stylianou, who became the Honorary President of the former ('Respect to the...' 1982, May 18). Between 1983-1985, Petros Stylianou was a consultant for the president of Cyprus and between 1985-1991 he was an elected member of Parliament for the second time. His political activity was useful for parents who consistently invited him to their meetings. Their decision to lobby for legislative changes to benefit children with learning difficulties and their families was the outcome of joined meetings held in April 1983 ('Actions and events...', 1983, April 4; 'New actions...', 1983, April 16). By the end of April 1983, the Ministers' Council examined parents' demand for legislation for mentally retarded people and agreed to promote it ('Legislation for...', 1983, April 26). In this case, parents succeeded in finding a way to lobby the state through a politician who knew the political language very well.

Furthermore, the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Mentally Retarded People also joined a new collective organization, Cyprus Confederation of Organizations of Disabled People (CCODP) formed in 1984, which aimed to substitute the first collective organization PORDP by accepting only disabled people's organizations as members. Thus, this particular PA became a member after a special arrangement in the CCODP's statutes ('Disabled people...', 1984, November 22). A careful analysis of CCODP's archive (minutes and letters) indicates that CCODP's primary goal was the improvement of the legislative framework for disabled people (Symeonidou, 2005). Primary sources suggest that Anthoula Theofilou, who represented the PA in CCODP, stated that 'the future of mentally retarded people lies in CCODP's actions'. CCODP's leader, the lawyer Mikis Florentzos, a leading disabled activist himself, agreed to help her with

legislative issues (Cyprus Confederation of Organizations of Disabled People, 1987, February 18).

The outcome of these fermentations was the passing of the 1989 Mentally Retarded Persons Act (N.117/89). According to the law, a Committee should be appointed to safeguard the rights of people with learning difficulties and promote legislative improvements in all areas affecting their lives. The new law also established a Fund to assist the Committee promote its goals. Increased involvement of the PA in the passing of this law resulted in the legislative arrangement that half of the Committee's members should come from their association and half of them should be state officials. This law is a landmark in the association's history.

In this case, organized parents found their way in politics and they were successful in securing legislation for a particular group of children. They pursued building networks with influential people and groups, until they achieved what they considered best for their children: a special law for people with learning difficulties.

Parental pressure groups: resolving issues of identity and power

In the 1980s, while parents of children with learning difficulties were involved in powerful politics to improve social provision for their own interest group, the idea of integration reached Cyprus. After a critique of the separatist education system expressed in a Unesco report (Benevento, 1980), the Ministry of Education and Culture adopted a rhetoric of integration recorded in official documents (Phtiaka, 2006a).

Soon, integrative practice began to take place in the absence of relevant legislation. The formation of the Pancyprrian Parents' Association of Deaf Children in 1987 determined the massive turn towards integration. Parents of children with hearing impairments expressed their dissatisfaction with the education provided by the School for the Deaf and powerfully lobbied the state to legitimate their children's rights for integration (Kouppanou and Phtiaka, 2006). In 1993, the Integration of Deaf Children in the Education System Act (Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary Education) (N.61(I)/93) passed, which actually legitimized the integration of children with hearing impairments in the mainstream. I shall return to this legislation later in this paper.

In 1991, the Pancyprrian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs was formed, a collective organization aiming to represent parents of children with different types of impairments. Eleven associations joined the federation upon its formation. Importantly, the federation's first president was Pavlos Toumazos, who was also the president of the Pancyprrian Parents' Association of Deaf Children.

Today, there are twenty-five member-associations of different types, as the following table 1 suggests.

Association type	Members	Number
Special School Parents' Associations	Parents whose children attend the same special school, but they do not necessarily have the same type of impairment	12
Single-Impairment Parents' Associations	Parents whose children have the same type of impairment	6
County Based Parents' Associations	Parents whose children attend schools in the same county, but they do not have the same type of impairment	4
Disability Organizations	Disabled and/or non-disabled people	3
TOTAL		25

Table 1: Synthesis of the Pancyprrian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs in 2007

The particularity of the federation's composition lies in the fact that only six out of twenty five associations are single-impairment PAs. Twelve associations are special school PAs and four associations are county based PAs. Put simply, parents' unifying feature was not their child's impairment, but their child's special school or county respectively. Last but not least, three organisations are not PAs, but disability organizations. As I now turn to explain, the federation's position on educational developments that followed is closely related to its synthesis.

Parents' pressure for integration prior to the formation of the federation resulted in the appointment of a Committee to investigate the provision of special education and make suggestions for improvements. PAs and the parents' federation expressed their views to the Committee which finally produced a report known as the Constandinides Report (Constandinides, 1992) which suggested the legitimisation of integration. Based on this report, three subsequent draft legislation documents about integration were prepared (1995, 1997 and 1998) and parents were involved in a consultation process held in the Education Parliamentary Committee. This time, parental involvement was more powerful than their involvement in the consultation process of 1978-1979 described earlier. PAs submitted documents with detailed suggestions about the proposed legislation and they participated in numerous parliamentary meetings. The interplay between parents' suggestions and state's reservations regarding the cost of the legislation resulted in amendments and compromise, discussed in more detail elsewhere (Symeonidou and Phtiaka, 2002).

The parents' federation expressed its views on the draft legislation of 1998 by submitting an amended copy of the draft legislation with their suggestions in blue and red print. With this multi-colour copy which revised specific points of the draft legislation, parents demonstrated their overall agreement with the philosophy of integration proposed in the forthcoming legislation. The federation's position about one particular issue demonstrates that parents had a long way to go until member-associations resolved issues of identity and power. According to the 1998 White Paper, all existing legislation relevant to the education of disabled children would be abolished after the passing of the new law. Even though the parents' federation agreed with the abolition of the first segregating law of 1979, it was against the abolition of the 1993 legislation about the integration of children with hearing impairments (N.61(I)/93).

Why did parents oppose to the abolition of the 1993 law when the proposed legislation would cater for children with hearing impairments anyway? Why should children with hearing impairments continue to have their own law?

The answers in these questions are partly found in the philosophy underpinning the views of the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Deaf Children, and partly in the cultural assumption that whatever is gained at political level should never be abolished. Parents of children with hearing impairments had been long struggling for the passing of the 1993 law, which was considered the most successful outcome of their organization. They were confident that the education provided in the School for the Deaf, the only special school for children with hearing impairments, was inappropriate. This was also emphasised in an influential evaluation report about the quality of education of children with hearing impairments (Markides, 1990), which suggested that all types of education for children with hearing impairments were problematic (School for the Deaf, special unit, mainstream class). According to Kouppanou and Phtiaka (2006), parents were so determined to secure integration for their children that they marginalized deaf education experts because they considered them responsible for the poor education provided by the School for the Deaf. They also marginalized the views of the organisation of adults with hearing impairments (Kouppanou and Phtiaka, 2006). Thus, it was extremely difficult for parents to let go of this law, even though its implementation was problematic as it was never followed by regulations. Their commitment in safeguarding the 1993 law is expressed in the following letter they sent to the Parliament at the time (Pancyprian Association of Parents of Deaf Children, 1998, June 9). Despite their initial insistence on this, parents finally agreed to the abolition of this law.

The amended copy of the draft legislation submitted by the parents' federation was prepared only seven years after the federation was formed, justifying the nature of its suggestions. From 1991 when the federation was formed, to 1998 when the federation submitted the final document with parents' suggestions on the draft legislation, the federation's member-associations gradually increased from eleven to twenty-one. In this time period, the consultation on the white papers proposing integration was the first and most significant mission of the federation. Member – associations had only a short experience as part of a federation and they hardly struggled to find a balance between what is best for the group of children they primarily represented and what is

best for children with different types of impairments that they were expected to represent as members of the federation. The fact that the vast majority of its member-associations were not single-impairment PAs was crucial as parents did not have to struggle over the different needs of each impairment group at the extent the disability movement had to do so (Symeonidou, 2005). Most PAs were representing children with different types of impairments who shared the same special school.

The passing of the 1999 law marked the political transition to integration giving a sense of satisfaction to organized parents. Its official implementation in 2001 began with gradual accommodations to improve integrative practice. As it is often the case, a gap between policy and practice was unavoidable. A recent evaluation report funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Phtiaka et al., 2005) informs us about the difficulties encountered to implement integration by the different stakeholders (i.e. Ministry officials, teachers and parents). As far as parents are concerned, Phtiaka et al. (2005) report that integration is implemented in a way that exhausts them physically and mentally without achieving the promised goals. Mainstream schools were not restructured in a way to encourage integration and more importantly, teachers did not receive adequate training regarding their new role. Phtiaka (2006b) reports that parents feel alone, intimidated and powerless and they have limited means of expressing themselves or affecting change. Despite the difficulties they face, parents insist on integration and they demand improvement of integrative practice.

Discussion

In the context of this analysis, I would argue that together with the historical, political and social particularities of Cyprus (see also Symeonidou, 2002), there are concurrent factors that shaped the nature of parental lobbying of the state regarding education.

To begin with, the absence of a representative number of single-impairment PAs led to limited opportunities for distinct parental group members to interact, share experiences, exchange views and co-operate for their children's best interests. This prevented them for shaping a group identity, a necessary prerequisite for powerful political engagement of a group (Hofstede, 2001). The plethora of special school PAs and county based PAs sentenced parents to reproduce the medical and the charity models characterising both the local culture and the nature of education provided by special schools.

Given the limited number of single-impairment PAs, interaction with equivalent single-impairment organisations of disabled people was restricted. Since most parents were not operating through single-impairment PAs, why would they even consider initiating co-operation with disabled people's single-impairment organizations? Such an interaction would perhaps enable parents to become better informed about the particularities of the education of their children and, the transition to adulthood and the labour market. For example, if constructive dialogue was initiated between parents of children with hearing impairments and the equivalent adults' organization, perhaps parents' lobbying for change would have been different and more beneficial for their children. Although disabled people's organizations in Cyprus have still a long way to go until they also engage in powerful disability politics, they have made important progress in criticizing oppressive policy from a human rights perspective (Symeonidou, 2005).

The absence of single-impairment PAs in Cyprus prevented parents from shaping a group identity that would strengthen their involvement in their collective federation and facilitate the shaping of a collective identity. To be more specific, parents did not undergo all the necessary steps to form a collective identity that would enable them to function as a collective movement (Crossley, 2002). Unlike the disability movement (Symeonidou, 2005), parents did not struggle to resolve basic issues such as collective ways of protest, ways of lobbying the state, ways of safeguarding the rights of all disabled children without undermining the particularities of different impairment groups. The fact that the parents' federation did not support the abolition of the law for the integration of children with hearing impairments at a time when a new law was emerging to legitimate the integration of all disabled children is quite informative of the nature of the federation. Last but not least, parents seem to be trapped in a perceived hierarchy of impairments that rests in the local culture, similar to the one characterising the disability movement (Symeonidou, 2005). Parents' sense of impairment hierarchy needs to be researched further and the connections with parents' social class and their children's type of impairment need to be drawn.

Although, for parents of disabled children, everyday life is a continuous struggle, they are empowered to influence decision-making and improve their children's quality of life. As parents gradually gain political power and build networks, the question is to which direction they will now use it.

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