



Qualitative evaluation of an intervention programme fostering students' social participation implemented by Greek and Portuguese elementary school teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perspectives of teachers in Greece and Portugal on the effectiveness of a newly developed programme (FRIEND-SHIP intervention) aiming at fostering students' social participation. Sixteen elementary school teachers, ten from Greece and six from Portugal, who implemented the programme in their classes were interviewed before and after implementation. The thematic analysis performed indicates that the intervention was perceived as successful in improving the students' social skills and the overall classroom climate. Specific benefits were noted for students with disabilities and for those from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds. Overall, the FRIEND-SHIP programme was viewed as an easy to implement intervention with a relevant structure and content and was valued as very promising in fostering all students' social participation.

1. Introduction

Since the right to access public education for students with disabilities (SWD) was recognized and became a priority for governments, schools have been called upon to face the challenge of responding effectively to the *education for all* demand (Ainscow et al., 2019). The inclusive education movement calls teachers to create a positive and supportive class environment, where all students play an active role, feel accepted and develop friendships (Yu et al., 2012). Within such an environment students are enabled to develop their socio-emotional skills and become socially competent. Given the importance allocated to the students' socio-emotional development (UN, 2006), it is not surprising that substantial research attention has been directed to examining various social outcomes associated with inclusive schooling. In this regard, Koster and colleagues (2009) proposed "social participation" as the most suitable term to capture the fullness of the social aspects of inclusive education. Specifically, these authors defined social participation as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of four central themes: *friendships/relationships; contacts/interactions; self-perception of social acceptance* and *acceptance by classmates*. Utilising this framework, several researchers (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2010; Schwab,

2015) have found that SWD experience poor social participation within regular education settings. These studies have consistently reported that SWD are less accepted, have fewer friends and fewer social interactions with classmates than their peers without disabilities (Avramidis et al., 2018; Schwab, 2019). More worryingly even when SWD manage to establish some friendships, these seem to be of lower quality, less intimate and less stable than the ones reported by their peers without disabilities (Bossaert et al., 2013; Schwab, 2019).

1.1. Social participation interventions

The well-documented social difficulties SWD experience in regular schools could be partly attributed to their insufficient sets of age-group appropriate social skills but also could be the result of many other factors, such as peers' negative attitudes, overall unfavourable classroom and school climate, and teachers' lack of efficacy on including SWD to name but a few. Despite the importance of environmental factors, several structured Social Skill Training (SST) programmes have exclusively focused on marginalized SWD with a view of boosting their social competence and assisting their participation in their class network (Dean & Chang, 2021; Kavale & Mostert, 2004). However, SST

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programmes have proved only minimally effective in teaching social skills to children with learning disabilities and, by extension, improving their social standing in their class (Gresham et al., 2001). The rather weak effects detected could be because SST interventions take place in contrived and decontextualized settings such as resource rooms or other clinical settings thus leading to poor maintenance and generalization effects (Dean & Chang, 2021).

The literature also contains examples of more sophisticated interventions which are designed to foster the social participation of SWD through promoting enhanced social interactions and developing positive relations with peers (Garrote et al., 2017). Such interventions are implemented at the whole school level and some key systemic factors such as the whole school ethos, staff and peer attitudes are also altered. In a systematic review aimed at assessing common elements of disability awareness interventions –aiming at improving attitudes and increasing acceptance– Lindsay and Edwards (2013) classified these interventions into 5 types, namely:

- (1) social contact – where children are exposed to a SWD;
- (2) simulation – in which children experience challenges that persons with a disability face in their routine through simulation activities;
- (3) curriculum-based activities - which can entail presentations, stories and classroom exercises focused on a wide range of disabilities;
- (4) multi-media curriculum – including the use of videos and web-based activities to facilitate learning and class discussions about different types of disabilities;
- (5) multiple components – in which different approaches are combined over multiple sessions.

In considering the above approaches, Lindsay and Edwards (2013) concluded that successful interventions represent multi-component approaches promoting social interactions which are implemented over a period of time and monitored by rigorous measures. Similarly, in a report comparing school-based social participation interventions, Hasani et al. (2020) stressed that the active engagement of students, the use of a multi-component approach and the implementation over a long period of time are central features for sustainable outcomes. The authors also found that interventions aiming to increase students' social participation focus on three components: developing students' social skills and social understanding; teaching students about respecting and valuing diversity; and improving student's competencies to establish and maintain friendships. Similarly, in the systematic review conducted by Garrote and colleagues (2017), the authors concluded that teaching interaction strategies to pupils was the most commonly utilised type of intervention along with structured group (academic and social) activities. More importantly, all reviewed interventions involved the SWD's typically developing peers, which highlights the importance of utilizing the peer group to address a particular student's social needs.

1.2. The FRIEND-SHIP intervention

The FRIEND-SHIP intervention programme was developed within the scope of an ERASMUS+ Funding Program (Reference: 2019-1-AT01-KA201-05 1226), which aimed at improving the social participation and inclusion of all students aged between eight and eleven years. The programme was designed by a group of researchers from four European countries collaborating on the above-mentioned project. The programme's activities were first developed in English and were subsequently translated into the respective languages, while adaptations for the relevant contexts were also made by the research teams, external academics in the field and teachers.

The programme was designed to be implemented by regular teachers and was structured around three fundamental pillars to promote students' social participation: (a) developing students' social competences

and social understanding; (b) teaching students about respecting and valuing diversity; and (c) improving students' social skills to establish relations and maintain existing friendships. It consists of the following 12 sessions, each with an approximate duration of 45 to 60 min, conducted two times a week, over a period of 6 weeks:

- 1 Breaking the ice and signing the contract
- 2 Collaboration and solidarity building in class
- 3 Recognizing, expressing and coping with emotions
- 4 Strengths and Weaknesses
- 5 Celebrating diversity
- 6 Putting ourselves in other peoples' shoes
- 7 Treating others, the way you like to be treated
- 8 Developing self-control and assertive behaviour
- 9 Social problem solving
- 10 Peer relationships and friendships
- 11 Making new friends and keeping the old ones
- 12 The end of the journey

Detailed information about the sessions' content, materials and activities can be found at <https://friendship.univie.ac.at/>.

1.3. The context of the study

The FRIEND-SHIP intervention programme was implemented in Greece and Portugal. In Greece, inclusive education has been actively promoted over the last twenty years through various policy initiatives championing educational and human rights values. Underpinning these reforms were the European principles for inclusion promoting "A School for All" (European Agency, 2003). The Educational Law 3699/2008 represents a significant milestone in the development of inclusive provision in schools since it emphasised the importance of including all SWD and called for a variety of organizational arrangements in order to make inclusion practice. Consequently, support is offered to students needed either in resource rooms within mainstream schools or inside the regular classroom with the presence of a specialized co-teacher. The recently developed national curriculum also highlights the social component of learning calling teachers to involve all their students in experiential, group activities which aim to develop both their social and academic skills and further strengthen their social relationships.

In Portugal, promoting an inclusive classroom climate is perfectly aligned with the scope of the last education reform in 2018 – Decree-Law No. 54/2018 –, which advocates the principles, procedures and practices of an inclusive education system. This new legislation defines inclusive school as a place "where each and every student, regardless of their personal and social situation, finds responses to their potential, expectations, and needs, and develops a level of education that creates full participation, a sense of belonging, and equity, contributing to social inclusion and cohesion" (Ministério da Educação, 2018). A multilevel approach to enhance the accessibility to the curriculum was adopted defining three levels of measures to support learning and inclusion of students: *universal measures* mobilized for all students "to promote participation and improved learning" (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art. 8); *selective measures* "to fill the need for learning supports not provided by the fulfilment of universal measures" (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art. 9); and *additional measures* "to respond to intense and persistent communication, interaction, cognitive or learning difficulties that require specialized resources of support to learning and inclusion" (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art. 10). The FRIEND-SHIP intervention as a whole-class approach is congruent with the aims of *universal measures* to promote personal, interpersonal and social intervention development (Decree-Law 54/2018, Art. 8, Point 3).

2. Aims of the study

The evaluative feedback from the main implementers of

interventions such as FRIEND-SHIP – teachers – is scarce (Rademaker et al., 2021; Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2015). Several authors have called for demonstrations of the effectiveness of interventions which are accompanied by indicators about their acceptability, relevance and usefulness (Carter & Pesko, 2008; Rademaker et al., 2021; Snell, 2003). These authors call not only for the assessment of measurable outcomes envisaged by the intervention, but also for the eliciting of the opinions of those responsible of implementing the programme. Given that the FRIEND-SHIP intervention is implemented mainly by teachers, our aim is to study the perspectives of Greek and Portuguese teachers on the effectiveness of the intervention, as well as their experiences accumulated through the implementation of the programme in their classes.

3. Method

The study has adopted a qualitative research design rooted within the tradition of programme evaluation research in applied naturalistic settings. As Patton (2002) stated, while programme evaluation was originally focused on measuring effectiveness through the collection of numerical data, more recently it has involved the collection of qualitative data yielding participants' perceptions and programme processes. Such an approach was deemed appropriate in order to evaluate an intervention implemented in elementary schools in Greece and Portugal between April and June 2021.

In Greece the project was approved by the authors' University Ethics Research Committee (Protocol Number: 33/16-12-2020) and in Portugal by the General Directorate of Education (Protocol Number: 0599700002). Additionally, the informed consent of the participating teachers was acquired by asking them to sign relevant forms. All parents of the participating students were informed about the project and provided their written consent prior to commencing the study.

3.1. Participants

The programme was implemented in schools which had agreed to participate in the study following an invitation letter sent to all primary schools of the universities' districts in both countries. Ten Greek teachers (seven female and three male) and six female Portuguese teachers participated in the intervention, drawn from five and two schools, respectively. The Greek teachers' age ranged from 46 to 58 years, and their teaching experience ranged from 19 to 29 years. Respectively, the Portuguese teachers' age ranged from 35 to 51 years, and their teaching experience ranged from 13 to 25 years. Participating students' ages ranged from 8 to 12 years attending the schools' three upper grades. The Greek classes consisted of 207 students including 50 SWD, 21 ethnic minority and 15 Roma students. The Portuguese classes consisted of 127 students including 13 SWD. Given that the study represents a programme evaluation, we focused on examining the programme's impact on the whole class and not on discussing specific cases of SWD or students from minority groups, other than when the teachers mentioned such cases themselves.

3.2. Training procedures

In both countries, all teachers who implemented the intervention received relevant training regarding the FRIEND-SHIP intervention which was delivered by the research teams in each country and lasted two consecutive days. The training took place at the respective universities and focused on the theoretical foundations underpinning the FRIEND-SHIP intervention, that is, the increasing attention to social participation as an outcome of inclusive education, the conceptualisation of social participation and its components, and the available data on social participation interventions (characteristics – worked skills/information; duration, strategies; and effects). Training sessions consisted of both the theoretical underpinnings of the programme and more practical (hands-on) activities including role-playing on how teachers

would present programme's activities to their classes. Teachers also exchanged ideas about potential challenges in the programme's implementation and formulated possible solutions. After receiving the training, teachers implemented the FRIEND-SHIP intervention programme in its totality within their classes with minimal supervision from the research teams. They were specifically instructed to tailor certain programme activities to the unique needs of SWD present in their classes; for example, activities requiring fine motor skills represent a challenge for students with motor difficulties and need adaptation.

3.3. Data collection procedures

Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the participating teachers one week before the teacher training and one week after the FRIEND-SHIP intervention was completed. All 16 participating teachers were interviewed before and after programme implementation in person.

Interviews prior to teachers' training were guided by a schedule eliciting teachers' perceptions about the social participation of their students, as well as the climate experienced in their classroom. Thus, teachers were asked to reflect on the dimensions of social participation proposed by Koster et al. (2009), as well as providing incidents of social exclusion occurring within their classes. Teachers were also asked to reflect on the emphasis they place on promoting students' social participation and to describe the practices, if any, they had adopted for that purpose.

After the completion of the FRIEND-SHIP intervention, teachers were asked about the same topics as in the initial interviews, and, additionally were asked to identify any changes experienced by their students throughout the intervention. Teachers were also asked to evaluate if the FRIEND-SHIP intervention fulfilled the envisaged aims and to suggest potential modifications for improvement.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the signed consent of participant teachers. The authors of this study conducted the interviews, which took approximately 30 min each.

3.4. Data analysis procedures

All the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The data were qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis to establish themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both sets of data were coded separately by four researchers (two per country coding national data) in order to identify recurring themes in the teachers' discourse. This process involved applying a predetermined coding scheme reflecting the dimensions of the interview schedule utilised. However, at the same time extra care was exercised for the identification of emerging themes and subthemes. The developed coding scheme was compared between both countries and similarities and idiosyncrasies were discussed. Agreed themes and sub-themes were checked against data sets from each country. This resulted in a comparable coding scheme able to fulfil the study aims and, at the same time, respond to the nuances of cultures in each country.

4. Findings

Two overarching themes emerged from the interviews and are described in Fig. 1. Results are presented in the text below with quotations (T = id of teachers and GR/PT = Greece/Portugal). Teachers' perceptions before and after completing the intervention are presented separately.

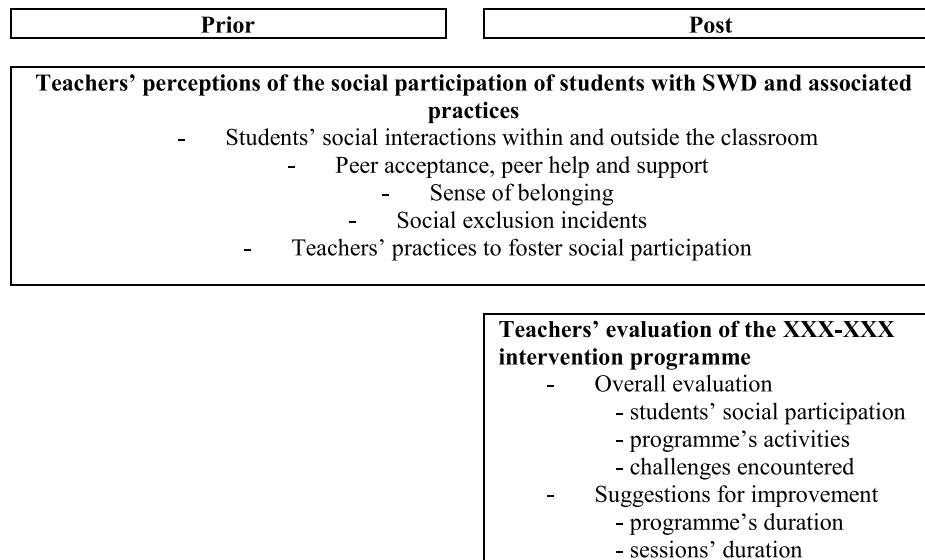


Fig. 1. Themes and Subthemes emerged from teachers' interviews before and after implementing the FRIEND-SHIP intervention programme.

4.1. Pre-intervention

4.1.1. Teachers' perceptions of the social participation of SWD and associated practices prior to implementing the programme

4.1.1.1. Students' social interactions within and outside the classroom. Before implementing the FRIEND-SHIP intervention, most of the Greek and Portuguese teachers reported positive social interactions between students within class. They stated that students cooperate and work in teams on a regular basis. Teachers had created in their classrooms a supportive climate based on communication with very rare arguments.

"We are sitting in groups or in dyads, ... they (students) cooperate, are friendly with each other, they don't argue often. [...] they are really close to each other." (T1_GR)

"In general, they have a good relationship with each other, are communicative and concerned about their peers." (T6_PT)

However, there were teachers who mentioned specific instances inside their classrooms of negative social relationships among their students. Specifically, in Portugal SWD or students with behavioural issues and those who perform tasks more slowly are reported by their teachers to have been singled out by their classmates. In Greece, such instances were also reported for students from different racial or ethnic minority backgrounds who were often unnecessarily criticised by their classmates resulting in their isolation.

"There is always tension between the student who faces significant difficulties in learning, and this is a challenge for me.. his peers always blame him for everything and they single him out of their groups." (T2_GR)

"There are two issues, the first is the question of a child who has learning difficulties and the class has already "adopted" this child in a protective sense; the other situation is that of another child who has family issues and she has difficulty in regulating her behaviour, attitude, achievement, etc., and the class already sees this girl with a less positive look." (T3_PT)

One Portuguese teacher reported that her class is difficult and there are often negative social interactions. The classroom climate is guided by criticism among students and, therefore, when a student gives a wrong answer, the group laughs or criticises.

"They like to criticize their classmates a lot and it is very difficult to

manage this because whenever someone does not respond to what is asked, the peers make fun, inhibiting the student or creating conflicts" (T4_PT)

As far as the students' interactions outside the classroom are concerned, these are mainly characterised as positive. Students engage in entertaining activities altogether. Most students spend time with each other in common extracurricular activities outside the school resulting in enhanced positive social interactions.

"Outside the classroom, during breaks, students play with each other, groups diversify depending on the games. Football is more for boys. They are all friendly to each other." (T5_PT)

4.1.1.2. Peer acceptance, peer help and support. In both countries, according to teachers' statements, most children feel welcomed and accepted within their classes. In most classes, students have known each other for years and, therefore, have learned to accept each other's individual differences.

"Even Chris (Roma student with amblyopia), is welcomed in the class. The rest of the children do not make him feel unwelcomed. [...] and, they wait for Helen (student with quadriplegia) to enter the class, they wait patiently for her to start the lesson, they don't complain." (T3_GR)

"In general, they help classmates when necessary and are supportive of everyone. When one gets hurt, others support him. When a new SWD arrives, they help him/her by orienting him/her in space and playing with him/her." (T2_PT)

However, there are cases of students who are not accepted by their peers. Such examples were reported in both Greece and Portugal. For example, one Greek student with a Roma background was reported as being socially rejected by his peers. It was only after the teacher's intervention that some basic social interactions were initiated. Likewise, another typically achieving girl experienced social isolation within her class which was attributed by her teacher to her adverse family circumstances. Similarly, in Portugal, one student was reported as having few friends and being isolated in break periods due to his temperament and personality. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that the majority of students support each other especially in academic-related tasks. With regard to social support, the data suggest that despite the general tendency of helping each other, there are students who deviate from this tendency and abstain from supporting their peers; it is only when they

are forced by their teacher that these students would provide such support.

“I need to ask them to help. They don’t take any initiative to help a classmate, but I constantly ask for it. It is my intention to make this happen.” (T2_GR)

4.1.1.3. Sense of belonging. Most of the participating teachers reported that the vast majority of their students feel that they belong to their class network.

“Students feel welcome in the group and demonstrate this by their involvement in the activities, the way they participate and by the relationship they have with their peers.” (T3_PT)

At the same time, they highlight cases of students, especially SWD or from an ethnic/cultural minority background, who seem to be part of the class in the sense of being accepted by their peers but could not be regarded as equal members of the class group.

“it is difficult to state that all students feel equal members of the class, because each of them has his/her unique characteristics which have led his/her classmates to behave in a certain way. And, this situation is hard to be altered” (T6_GR)

The majority of the participating teachers reported that there are cases of students within their classes that cannot be characterised as belonging to the class-group. Several explanations were put forward for this including their possessing poor social skills, family issues, low academic achievement, and personal characteristics, i.e., appearance or disability. Special reference was made by the Greek teachers to students coming from a different racial background (Roma) whose attendance to the school is irregular thus affecting their socialisation in it.

“Some students who don’t attend school on a regular basis (e.g., Roma students) feel lonely. [...] because they don’t have anyone to play with them and they complain about the fact that the other children have already made their groups without them” (T5_GR)

“I think that poor academic achievement is the reason for somebody to be alone. It has also to do with the family background, which is not supportive to develop further their social relationships” (T6_GR)

“I have a student with learning disabilities who is often seen alone because his classmates don’t want to play the same games he wants” (T3_PT)

4.1.1.4. Social exclusion incidents. The evidence regarding social exclusion within the participating schools is rather mixed. While half of the interviewed Greek teachers dismissed the existence of such incidents, the remaining teachers mentioned some occasional instances of social exclusion. The latter mentioned examples of students being rejected by their peer groups during break times. Specifically, students with irregular attendance or behavioural issues are often left out by their peer group during entertaining activities (e.g., games) and lunchbreak.

“during break times I often see a SWD expressing challenging behaviour which results to his exclusion from the peer group” (T2_GR)

In turn, Portuguese teachers reported that they often observe the groups formed within the class to be maintained during break times, thus resulting to some students being isolated in the playground.

“Children interact successfully, but sometimes they create small groups which can be exclusive and behave “badly” to others” (T3_PT)

One Portuguese teacher reported that a student suffered from bullying and that the situation had already been identified and addressed by the school. Although the explicit manifestations of bullying

had stopped, coexistence among some students at school remained difficult.

“There was a case in which a girl repeatedly sent nasty messages via teams to a classmate. The parents of both students were informed and the situation stopped there. However, within the class, tension between these students continue” (T3_PT)

When teachers in both countries notice incidents of social exclusion, they actively intervene through organised and reflective discussions within their class with limited success because they feel that they do not possess the necessary knowledge or skills to deal with such issues effectively. In this respect, most teachers expressed their perceived need for undertaking training in implementing more targeted interventions to tackle social exclusion of specific students.

“I feel that this is an area that teachers are not so well prepared because I learnt how to teach mathematics, Portuguese and the other subjects, but I really need to know more about how to work with students to be kind and empathic to each other” (T3_PT)

“when such incidents take place, we try through discussions to make children to understand how their classmates feel and to put them in others’ position” (T5_GR)

“We debate the problem in class, always emphasizing that we are all different and that is why we must accept everyone as we are” (T2_PT)

4.1.1.5. Teachers’ practices to foster social participation. Fostering social participation emerged as a top priority for all teachers interviewed. They claim that ensuring social participation is an integral part of their role as teachers and a main function of formal schooling.

“I think that I spend sufficient time in fostering students’ social participation. I believe offering our children knowledge on academic domains is not enough.. we should expand on other skills in order our students become well-developed personalities” (T6_GR)

“I am constantly committed to promoting the social participation of all my students” (T2_PT)

Participating teachers claimed to have used various strategies to promote students’ social participation which can be distinguished at two levels: pupil-level and class-level. At pupil-level, arrangements are made for pupils at risk of experiencing poor social participation, such as individualised activities aimed at enhancing students’ self-regulation, one-to-one counselling sessions with the individual concerned, and implementing interventions to boost weak students’ self-confidence.

“I often work with individual students... I am focusing on altering their perceptions about themselves and boosting their confidence” (T1_GR)

At the class level, teachers’ actions include organised discussions with a view to instilling in the students the sense that they are all equal members of the class; group activities within and outside the class; and interventions to develop empathy and build positive social relationships among the students.

“I am trying to involve all students in teamwork activities. I even stop the lesson in order to get out of the classroom and play a game [...] my intention is to understand the feelings of each other.. to solve any arguments among them, to have a positive stance towards one another” (T2_GR)

“I propose creative group work for students to actively participate and get involved with enthusiasm” (T6_PT)

4.2. Post-Intervention

4.2.1. Teachers' perceptions of the social participation of SWD and associated practices following implementation of the programme

4.2.1.1. *Students' social interaction within and outside the classroom.* All participating teachers observed a notable improvement on the social interactions among students inside and outside the classroom.

"Groups of friends have diversified and increased in number." (T5_PT)

"Improvements were noted in interactions between students. Even the students themselves recognized that there was an improvement in their friendships" (T3_PT)

Specifically, teachers contended that cooperation, teamwork, support to each other and respect had developed significantly since the beginning of the programme. At the same time, they noticed that children had become more tolerant and less argumentative.

"Now I see a strong team spirit, stronger than it was before, I see them support each other, respect each other, listen to each other, accept the different views, their ego has been minimised and they don't insist on their opinions." (T1_GR)

"This project was an asset to the group. Dialogue and constant reflection on the activities led them to improve certain behaviours and attitudes, to put themselves in the other people's shoes and to be even more tolerant and understanding" (T6_PT)

Furthermore, they claimed that students' social skills of recognising and handling their emotions, self-control and empathy were further developed. According to several teachers, students' involvement in the programme assisted them in recognising theirs and their peers' feelings, discuss more meaningfully and behave appropriately.

"I think that the programme helped a lot in recognising and controlling their own feelings and developing empathy among the students. They all learned aspects of their peers' personality that they haven't known, how they think, how they feel and how they behave in certain situations." (GR_T4)

4.2.1.2. *Peer acceptance, peer help and support.* All teachers claimed that the participating students improved the acceptance they receive from their classmates. Specifically, some SWD or students isolated before the start of the programme became more accepted and initiated new friendships.

"In my class there is a child with autism and I was curious to see the reactions of his classmates during the sessions. They never left him out, and for example, in the activities requiring the formation of pairs he was never the last to be chosen" (T2_PT)

In Greece, teachers highlighted the benefits for students with ethnic/cultural minority background, who were given the opportunity to express themselves through their involvement in the programme, leading to the development of an environment of understanding and acceptance towards them.

"I believe that a chance was given to children who are not Greek to express themselves and I think that their peers also had the chance to listen and to understand how they feel. After that, they didn't become close friends with each other, but there weren't any tensions, which I think it is really important" (T8_GR)

Moreover, teachers claimed that the programme strengthened students' self-confidence and self-worth. Lastly, most of the participating teachers highlighted the development of a supportive environment among the students characterised by solidarity, cooperation and strong willingness to help each other.

"during break times they play all together without tensions. Even a child who was previously marginalised, now is a member of the peer group and is finally accepted. I am really proud of this" (T1_GR)

"This project had a very positive impact on students in terms of relationships and, especially of their confidence to participate during classes" (T6_PT)

4.2.1.3. *Sense of belonging.* Most of the participating teachers stated that the programme contributed to the development of students' sense of belonging, including those who joined the class during the programme's implementation:

"I think that the programme helped everyone in the class but mostly two students. Specifically, a girl who had literally no friends, and now, she interacts with her classmates, she has friends, they play together. Another girl who just moved to the city and in our school was welcomed and accepted by the peer group from the very first moment. This usually takes a long time to happen but I believe that the programme contributed to that being achieved quickly." (T4_GR)

4.2.1.4. *Social exclusion incidents.* Teachers mentioned that after the completion of the programme students seemed more united with very few incidents of exclusion or tensions taking place. According to teachers, the peer group made efforts and, in most cases, succeeded in including the students who were previously excluded. They were supportive and truly encouraging towards these students.

"The number of complaints (conflicts between students) has decreased, students respect each other's turn, they collaborate more and are friends with each other" (T5_PT)

4.3. Teachers' evaluation of the FRIEND-SHIP intervention programme

4.3.1. Overall evaluation

All participating teachers appraised positively the intervention programme and highlighted its success in fostering students' social participation. Specifically, it was perceived as well-structured with activities suitable for students' age group and easy on its implementation.

"It is really well-structured and its content was missing from our school practices. I think that the main aims of the programme, that of fostering the development of positive relationships among the students and that of bringing to the team the students who were previously excluded, were fulfilled with great success" (T10_GR)

"Students were led to think about their emotions, about their characteristics and those of their peers, and to resolve problematic situations. Of course, some students did it more easily than others, but the activities were overall appropriate and easy to implement" (T1_PT)

Moreover, the activities were described by all teachers as really enjoyable for both themselves and their students.

"we all had great time and especially students had a very positive experience of their involvement in the FRIEND-SHIP project. When it was completed, students asked me to do it next year too. They really liked the FRIEND-SHIP programme" (T2_GR)

"The feedback from the class was very positive... all students participated with great enthusiasm and motivation, they loved the dramatizations!" (T6_PT)

Nevertheless, implementing the programme also involved some challenges. For example, when students had to collaboratively develop a social contract containing rules of behaviour to follow during the implementation of FRIEND-SHIP, some teachers reported that students

had difficulties in articulating rules in a positive manner.

“When we were making the social contract as a group, I wondered if I’m usually saying “Don’t do this”, “Don’t do that” and that was the reason that my students couldn’t express the rules positively. I went home thinking on that and now I’m making an effort to change it” (T5_PT)

Furthermore, in some classes the activities involving expression of emotions and role-playing were challenging for some students. In these classes, teachers reported that some students had difficulty in putting themselves in other people’s shoes, which is essential in showing empathy to others.

“I often had to be the model, encourage students to participate and get involved in role-playing” (T4_PT)

“In some activities the pupils had more difficulties in getting involved – difficulty in expressing emotions, in abstract thinking and in being creative” (T2_PT)

4.3.2. Suggestions for improvement

Most of the participating teachers claimed that the programme’s duration could be longer. They suggested extending the programme by one or two weeks or even implement it during a full academic year in order for students to fully embrace all the values and skills they have learned through their involvement in the project.

“I think that one or two weeks would render the programme more effective in strengthening students’ social skills” (T8_GR)

“I think this is a project for an academic year – these are important issues that we work on, related to human rights. Students would benefit even more from the extension of the intervention” (T6_PT)

Furthermore, some teachers contended that in some sessions the time was not enough to complete all the scheduled activities. This was more evident in classes with younger children and for groups whose teachers reported being more difficult in terms of managing their behaviour.

“Some activities were quite demanding and couldn’t be completed in one hour” (T9_GR)

“The class is very difficult and that is why adherence to the activity is sometimes difficult, challenging time management in each activity” (T1_PT)

5. Discussion

The data collected prior to implementing the FRIEND-SHIP programme confirmed previous studies that have found a small but significant minority of students experiencing poor social participation within mainstream classes (Koster et al., 2010; Schwab, 2015). Specifically, while the participating teachers reported mainly positive social interactions between their students and a welcoming class climate, they mentioned, at the same time, that some students were occasionally socially excluded both within the class and during break-times. Moreover, in line with previous studies, SWD or students with behavioural issues were portrayed as less accepted and lacking meaningful social interactions with peers. The social difficulties, experienced by these students, were attributed to their poor academic achievement and personal characteristics (i.e., appearance or disability) as well as to their poor social skills resulting in anti-social behaviour (Bossaert et al., 2013; Frostad & Pijl, 2007). For example, Schwab et al. (2015) found that the low levels of prosocial behaviour displayed by SWD along with indirect forms of aggression were strong predictors of the social difficulties experienced by these students.

The data collected following the implementation of the FRIEND-SHIP programme revealed a strong perceived impact on the social participation of marginalised students in both countries and, notably, SWD and those students from an immigrant background (in Greece

only). Specifically, the evidence suggests that the opportunities offered to students for collaboration on joint tasks resulted in enhanced social interactions, improved peer acceptance and the emergence of new friendships, which are all considered important dimensions of social participation (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al. 2009). In the absence of any data relating to the final dimension of social participation, that of the students’ self-concept, it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the programme’s impact; nevertheless, the teachers’ accounts also pointed to benefits on that domain. Additionally, the programme was perceived as successful in improving overall classroom cohesion and the students’ social behaviour and attitudes towards their peers at risk of exclusion. In this respect, the present study lends support to the notion that social participation interventions are most effective when they are implemented at the class level involving all students (Spence, 2003; Garrote et al., 2017) instead of focusing solely on those at risk of social exclusion. Indeed, the FRIEND-SHIP programme was designed with a view to promoting all students’ social competence through cultivating understanding of diversity, promoting respect and strengthening important social skills. In doing so, all students are enabled to establish relations with peers, maintain existing friendships and possibly initiate new ones. However, a caveat needs pointing out here; while all participating teachers declared their commitment to the programme and commented strongly on its positive impact, they also raised concerns about the programme’s duration and the maintenance of its effects. The clear implication emanating from the evidence presented in this study is, therefore, that social interventions implemented in class settings should not be viewed as a one-off antidote to social exclusion; rather, there is a need to incorporate the programme’s practices within the teachers’ daily routines so that the students fully embrace all the prosocial skills they have developed through the programme and apply them. Moreover, teachers should design and implement cooperative learning activities which require collaboration among students and, at the same time, encourage the students to get involved in joint activities such as drama, art, music, and sports which provide opportunities for social interaction and the development of friendships. Within such a positive climate, the outcomes generated by interventions such as the FRIEND-SHIP programme are more likely to be maintained.

Greek and Portuguese teachers evaluated positively specific features of the programme, such as its structure and contents. They further stressed that the programme’s activities were easy-to-implement and students enjoyed their participation. The findings from this study concerning teachers’ positive perceptions of the programme’s relevance, effectiveness on fostering students’ social participation and easiness to implement it indicate the potential adoption of this intervention by teachers in the future. This is especially important as teachers’ acceptance and motivation to implement a particular intervention is largely dependent on its social validity which, in turn, refers to three pre-requisites: the intervention fits teachers’ goals and needs; its procedures are feasible to implement in the school routine; and its effects are clearly identified (Carter & Pesko, 2008; Rademaker et al., 2021).

Another important observation that can be made concerns the fact that the participating teachers were experienced professionals who reported from the outset high levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy in implementing the FRIEND-SHIP programme. It might be the case that young or inexperienced teachers may require more rigorous training prior to commencing the programme and receive more regular support during its implementation. Indeed, we would contend here that the success of any intervention such as the one described here is largely dependent on the teachers’ capacity and persistence in meeting the envisaged aims as well as the careful monitoring of its implementation and the offering of constructive feedback.

At this point, some limitations of the current study should be mentioned. First, we relied exclusively on the perceptions held by teachers without supplementing these with any other measurable outcomes of students’ social participation or juxtaposing them with students’ perceptions. Second, no observations of actual students’

behaviour during or after the implementation of the programme were conducted; such observations would have offered us an estimate of the frequency and quality of social interactions occurring among students. Third, an inherent limitation in all qualitative evaluations concerns the tendency of participants providing biased responses reflecting their personal commitment to the intervention and their desire for positive outcomes to be generated. However, we endeavoured to minimise this risk by including in the interview schedule questions depicting the programme's shortcomings and the respondents' recommendations for rectifying these.

Recognising these limitations, the present study has highlighted that intervention programmes of the type described here carry substantial potential for improving the social participation of all students involved. Clearly, achieving the social participation of all students is not guaranteed as social relations and friendships cannot possibly be engineered. However, assisting teachers to create the conditions for social interaction and participation through the implementation of enjoyable programmes such as the FRIEND-SHIP should be at the top of every school's agenda.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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