



***Promoting social and emotional learning in pupils with disability.  
Special teachers' perceptions and practices***

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Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are at risk for emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. Social and emotional learning (SEL) may be particularly beneficial to fostering these children's resilience. Given the importance of teacher's role in promoting SEL, the present study aimed to explore special teachers' perceptions of SEL and the practices they use to enhance their pupils' social and emotional skills. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 15 Greek primary and secondary education special teachers and were analysed with the use of reflexive thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the special teachers considered the creation of a supportive school environment a key prerequisite to addressing the pupils' with SEND needs. They perceived SEL as a process aiming to the development of social and emotional skills which contributes to pupils' emotional development and social inclusion. Although they used a number of practices for this purpose, their efforts were often hindered by the lack of collaboration with general education teachers and their limited knowledge on SEL. The findings are discussed with respect to the need to enhance cooperation between the members of the school community and teachers' training on SEL.

**Keywords:** social and emotional learning, special educational needs and disability, support teachers, supportive school environment

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**Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are at risk for psychosocial difficulties (Daley & McCarthy, 2021). Compared with their peers without disabilities, they

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experience to a greater degree emotional difficulties (Brossard-Racine et al., 2012; Dix, 2011) and have lower self-esteem (Augestad, 2017; Zuppardo et al., 2021). Besides, they are more likely to present conduct problems (Zuppardo et al., 2021), to be involved in bullying and victimisation (Rose et al., 2011) and to have difficulties in their relationships with peers (Brossard-Racine et al., 2012).

The above-mentioned problems are attributed to the children's difficulties in social and emotional skills (Rose et al., 2011); the lack of peer acceptance and of educational and social support, and the type of educational setting (Rose et al., 2011; Wiener & Tardif, 2004). Attending inclusive schools or classes contributes to pupils' with SEND social acceptance and to the formation of friendships with peers (Shogren et al., 2015), and is associated with fewer behaviour problems (Wiener & Tardif, 2004). However, evidence also indicates that pupils with SEND who attend regular classrooms for the most part of the school day present psychosocial difficulties and have lower self-esteem than their peers (Avramidis et al., 2018). These findings highlight the need for provision of social support and implementation of prevention programmes and interventions with the aim of enhancing the resilience of pupils with SEND in the school environment (Hart et al., 2014).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes may serve this purpose since they aim to foster pupils' social and emotional competencies, which constitute an important protective factor for their social-emotional development and their academic outcomes (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Zins & Elias, 2007).

SEL has been developed in the context of theory and research on prevention and promotion. Although it is considered as an "application of the science of emotional intelligence", it is distinct from this approach in that it places emphasis on social skills as well as on the development of emotional skills with the aim of fostering the children's personal functioning (Zins et al., 2007, p. 376). Payton and colleagues (2008, p. 5-6) define SEL as "the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to recognise and manage their emotions; set and achieve positive goals; demonstrate caring and concern for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; make responsible decisions; and handle interpersonal situations effectively".

SEL integrates two interrelated components. The first refers to the instruction of skills which are classified in five clusters of core competencies, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2005, as cited in Zins et al., 2007). The second component refers to the creation of a supportive school environment that is characterised by caring relationships, mutual respect, and cooperation between the members of the school community (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Zins et al., 2007). In this context, SEL is considered as a system of support that is intended for all pupils including those considered at risk (Zins & Elias, 2007).

SEL is promoted through the implementation of universal programmes delivered to all pupils and through targeted programmes. The latter are usually implemented outside the general classroom and are intended for pupils at risk (selected interventions) and pupils experiencing difficulties in the academic, emotional and social domain (indicated interventions) (Cefai et al., 2018). Universal SEL programmes benefit

pupils with SEND in enhancing their academic learning and psychosocial wellbeing and reduce the probability of stigmatisation, which targeted interventions could entail (Dix, 2011). However, in view of the additional needs of these children for support, the integration of targeted interventions with universal interventions (integrated interventions) is often considered as more appropriate. From the SEL perspective, targeted interventions are part of a whole school approach and may be implemented by the general education teacher in collaboration with other members of the school staff, parents, peers, and mental health professionals (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014).

Results from meta-analyses indicate that universal SEL programmes contribute to the enhancement of pupils' SEL skills; the improvement of their academic performance and their attitudes towards self, others, and school; and the reduction of conduct problems and internalising difficulties (Durlak et al, 2011; 2023; Sklad et al., 2012). However, research evidence regarding the effects of SEL programmes on children with disabilities is limited (Dix, 2011; Hassani & Schwab, 2021). As the systematic review of Daley and McCarthy (2021) has revealed, few studies investigating the effects of universal SEL interventions in adolescents specify whether pupils with disabilities are included in the study samples, and even fewer report the interventions' outcomes for this pupil group. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that SEL programmes positively impact on emotional competence of pupils with SEND (Gardner et al., 2021; Hassani & Schwab, 2021).

A considerable number of SEL programmes are implemented by teachers (Daley & McCarthy, 2021; Payton et al. 2008; Sklad et al., 2012). Teachers can effectively carry out these programmes (Payton et al., 2008; Sklad et al., 2012). Nevertheless, teachers' participation in the implementation of SEL programmes depends on their perceptions on SEL. Moreover, the latter play an important role on the programmes' outcomes (Collie et al., 2015; Triliva & Poulou, 2006). Although this issue has been investigated in a relatively small number of studies (Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021), research findings suggest that teachers consider SEL important (Buchanan et al., 2009) and acknowledge that promoting SEL is part of their role (Ferreira et al., 2021; Triliva & Poulou, 2006). However, they feel they lack the necessary knowledge and support and/or they do not have sufficient time to devote to this goal due to emphasis placed on academic achievement (Buchanan et al., 2009; Collie et al., 2015).

The above-mentioned findings are reported in studies exploring mainly general education teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding SEL. Although special teachers were included in the sample of a few studies (Buchanan et al., 2009; Collie et al., 2015), data concerning solely the perceptions of special educators regarding SEL is, to our knowledge, scarce (Gardner et al., 2021). Promoting SEL in pupils with SEND may be particularly challenging since there is a limited number of evidence-based targeted programmes and most universal programmes do not contain relevant content or resources (Dix, 2011; Gardner et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers are called upon to make adaptations of the content and the material of universal programmes, which increases their workload and may give rise to feelings of uncertainty (Gardner et al., 2021).

Taking into account the aforementioned limited data, the present study aimed to explore special teachers' perceptions and practices to promote SEL in pupils with SEND in mainstream schools. More specifically, the study aimed to address the following research questions:

- How do special teachers perceive SEL in relation to the provision of support to children with SEND?
- How do they believe SEL should be implemented?
- How do they implement SEL with pupils with SEND?

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

A purposeful sample was selected based on the following criteria: given the importance of providing SEL throughout all school levels (Zins & Elias, 2007) and the presence of psychosocial difficulties in pupils with SEND both during childhood and adolescence, participants had to be primary or secondary education special teachers. They also had to have three or more years of teaching experience in ‘integration classes’ and/or in ‘parallel support programmes’ in mainstream schools. According to the Greek legislation “integration classes” constitute a type of resource room where pupils with SEND receive instructional support for no more than 10 hours per week while they attend the mainstream classroom for the rest of the week. Parallel support is a model of co-teaching whereby pupils with SEND receive support from special teachers while attending solely the general classroom (Avramides et al., 2018; Vlachou et al., 2015).

Potential participants were first contacted by phone and were briefly informed about the purpose of the study. Then, an information letter along with an informed consent sheet was sent to them via e-mail containing detailed information about the goals and the procedure of the research; the prospective research benefits; a statement regarding the confidentiality and the anonymity of the participants’ responses and their right to withdraw from the research without giving any explanation. The special teachers who agreed to participate were asked to recommend colleagues who might also be interested in participating in the study. Following this snowball sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014), written informed consent was obtained from eight primary education (all females) and seven secondary education special teachers (five females, two males) (Table I). The special teachers were teaching in schools in Attica, in Northern Greece and of the island of Crete.

### *Data collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to address the goals of the study. The interview guide comprised 11 questions regarding the psychosocial difficulties of pupils with SEND and social support provision in mainstream schools; the teachers’ perceptions of the concept of SEL and the conditions under which SEL could be promoted; their efforts to implement SEL practices; and their perceptions about their knowledge of SEL and their own social and emotional competences.

**Table I***Participants' characteristics*

Level	Pseudonym	Teaching experience in special education	Teaching experience in integration classes/ parallel support	4-year * Degree**	Master's degree / PhD in:	In-service training (400 hours*) in:
<b>Primary education</b>	Katerina	15	10	SE		SE -Child psychology
	Ioanna	14	7	SE	SE	
	Antigone	13	9	SE		
	Penelope	17	10	SE		SE
	Zoe	14	9	SE	CP	
	Athanassia	14	11	Pedagogical Academy (2 years)		SE (2 years)
	Danae	18	11	SE	SE	SE and SP
	Myrto	9	9	SE	SE/ Doctoral candidate	
<b>Secondary education</b>	Smaragda	10	5	Philology	SE -Learning disabilities	SE
	Diomedes	12	9	Philology	SE	
	Paulina	7	7	Education	SP	SE
	Chara	8	7	Mathematics	SE/ Doctoral candidate	
	Krystallia	3	3	Mathematics		SE
	Meropi	5	5	Philology	SE	SE
	Nestoras	14	7	Physics		SE
*unless otherwise noted ** SE: Special education, SP: School psychology, CP: Counselling psychology						

*Data analysis*

Data were analysed with the use of reflexive thematic analysis in order to identify patterns and themes across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). An inductive approach was used. Codes were collated with the corresponding data extracts and themes and subthemes were generated by clustering the codes on the basis of their similarity, and by using a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The identified themes were reviewed by re-reading the data extracts in order to appraise their coherence. The entire data set was also read to ensure that themes reflected the important elements of the data. This phase involved sometimes recoding, and redrawing thematic maps and the boundaries of themes, which were thus refined. Defining and naming themes and subthemes followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Through this process three themes and seven subthemes were created (Table II).

**Table II***Themes and subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
The need for social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pupils' marginalisation and psychosocial difficulties</li> <li>- The lack of social support</li> </ul>
SEL is a process of cultivating skills for emotional development and social inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- SEL as a process to promote social and emotional competencies</li> <li>- SEL in the context of a supportive school environment</li> <li>- SEL as the outcome of collaborative work</li> </ul>
Implementing SEL practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhancing pupils' SEL skills</li> <li>- The lack of training as a barrier in implementing SEL</li> </ul>

Credibility was enhanced by prolonged engagement with the data through listening and transcribing the interviews, reading the transcripts several times, and moving backward and forward between the stages of data analysis. To ensure transferability, information about the participants' characteristics, detailed descriptions of the process of data collection and analysis, and sufficient participants' quotations were provided. Dependability was enhanced by creating an audit trail and keeping and archiving interview transcripts, interview notes, thematic maps, separate files for each phase of analysis along with files where reflective thoughts and decisions were recorded (Nowell et al., 2017). Throughout the research process, the researcher reflected on how possible preconceptions may have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) by rereading interview notes and reflective thoughts, and by questioning choices and decisions made.

**Findings***The need for social support*

*Pupils' marginalisation and psychosocial difficulties.* All special teachers reported that pupils with SEND present psychosocial difficulties and have low self-esteem because of their poor academic performance. They particularly stressed the marginalisation these children experience at school by their peers who make fun of them: "... the general class pupils may mock them in such a way that they hit a nerve, for example 'how do you read like that?', 'why do you stutter?'" (Athanassia). Isolation and stigmatisation either caused feelings of anxiety and distress or led children with SEND to exhibit aggressive behaviour in order to gain attention and be accepted by their classmates. Besides, their social interaction was hindered by their poor skills in following rules; appropriately communicating and collaborating with others and resolving conflicts; and recognising, expressing, and managing emotions: "Many times a pupil [being mocked] vents anger in their behaviour expressing wrath. I have even seen school desks being destroyed" (Diomedes).

*Lack of social support at school.* The participants thought that the school fails to provide the necessary social support to pupils with SEND, which they attributed to the absence of a pupil-centred approach, since

education is mainly focused on academic knowledge, to the general education teachers' negative attitudes towards pupils with SEND as well as to the scarcity of psychological and counselling services at school: "*When a psychologist visits a school once a week and that school has 400 children, who will they see first? What will they do first?*" (Krystallia).

*SEL as a process of cultivating skills for emotional development and social inclusion*

*SEL as a process to promote social and emotional competencies.* The special teachers perceived SEL as a process aiming at the development of social and emotional skills, which contribute to the pupils' emotional development and social inclusion.

*[SEL means] that... we are essentially working on the social cultivation of the individual, on them acquiring the formal skills to be able to live independently but also functionally in a society; and the emotional [learning], in order to be emotionally well-adjusted.* (Katerina)

Most of the secondary education special teachers were less familiar with SEL than primary education teachers. They viewed SEL as a process that could help children deal with their psychosocial difficulties and develop their self-awareness and self-esteem: "*...to work in groups or individually and set goals regarding our relationship with ourselves and others, and our emotions, regarding the things that concern or trouble us*" (Nestoras).

While describing emotional skills, the special teachers mentioned the ability "*...to recognise their feelings, in themselves, and then the feelings of others, so that self-perception, self-regulation be developed*" (Myrto). The participants – especially the secondary education teachers – elaborated more on skills involved in social relationships, namely the ability to communicate and cooperate, initiate social interaction, show empathy, resolve conflicts, follow rules, seek help, and respect others' rights: "*In social skills I would definitely include the ability to approach others, to communicate, the ability to confront others, but without tension, to have friendly disagreements*" (Meropi).

The participants pointed out that SEL contributes to the improvement of the relationship with oneself and to the prevention or the reduction of pupils' emotional and behavioural difficulties, which in turn can have a positive impact in their academic outcomes: "*I think that they [the pupils] will definitely be more in touch with themselves, if they manage to handle their emotional world, they could better function on a learning level. They will be more concentrated*" (Antigone). In addition, they emphasised the benefits of developing SEL skills on the pupils' personal life: "*It is very important for children to learn some emotional values so that they will be able to deal with others, with their colleagues at work. Human relationships are based on this*" (Smaragda).

Most special teachers thought that SEL skills should not be taught but cultivated, since this would allow them to "*get into a process of looking for things on their own, of putting themselves in other people's shoes, to feel how they feel*" (Chara). They considered experiential ways of learning as most appropriate and maintained that everyday school life provides various opportunities for the reinforcement of SEL skills.

According to secondary education special teachers, SEL skills could also be fostered by making use of the courses' content and encouraging group discussions in class: "*Besides the learning goal, each course, each school subject also has an emotional, social goal*" (Paulina). Only two participants proposed the integration of a SEL programme or lesson into the curriculum.

*SEL in the context of a supportive school environment.* The special teachers commented that, in order to promote SEL, the school should aim not only to improve the pupils' academic outcomes but also to promote their emotional and social development. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the creation of a school culture characterised by supportive and collaborative relationships between all the members of the school community: "*Children provide extremely important support to their peers. Well, for this to happen, there must be such a similar mentality in the entire school*" (Penelope). Effort should be made to change general education teachers' mindsets regarding their involvement in addressing the emotional and social needs of all pupils:

*The teachers of the regular classroom could also deal with it [the pupil's with SEND difficulty] [...] they also could do it, let's say, on their own, if there was this mindset that we should all care and become a team. That we are there for all children, that we must all be there for all children.* (Danae)

*SEL as the outcome of collaborative work.* The participants emphasised that collaboration between special and general education teachers is necessary "*so that some [SEL] skills can be generalised*" (Zoe). Some special teachers argued that practices to enhance pupils' SEL skills should be first implemented in the integration class, where a more individualised approach can be adopted, and then be applied in the general classroom. On the other hand, several teachers maintained that SEL should be promoted in the general classroom since it can contribute to the social inclusion of pupils with SEND and to the social and emotional development of all children: "*...because typical children, too, have issues, mainly in managing their emotions. So, they will also benefit a lot and learn to accept diversity*" (Meropi).

The importance the special teachers attached to the issue of collaboration seems to be closely related to their experiences when trying to implement SEL practices. As they explained, general education teachers did not "value" such practices or were reluctant to implement them because either they prioritised academic knowledge or they doubted that the pupils with SEND could acquire SEL skills.

*I asked them to do some programmes I had created, and they were struggling with that, "When will these programmes take place?", "we will miss classes", so these programmes didn't take place [...]* The classroom teacher always plays a part in this, I may have built something, and this work is torn down because there is no continuity (Athanasia)

The special teachers also considered the appointment of school psychologists in schools and collaboration with them to be a key prerequisite for implementing SEL. School psychologists could assess children's SEL skills; suggest and coordinate SEL programmes; and provide support to the pupils and information and consultation to the teachers and the parents: "*I simply believe that there must be someone else*



*besides us, who will give us the directions or answer our questions. Or guide us properly. There should be, what do they call it, supervision?” (Nestoras).*

In addition, the participants mentioned that collaboration with the children’s parents would be particularly helpful: “[*there is*] a need for collaboration with the parents [...] to educate the parents, get them on board too!” (Katerina).

### *Implementing SEL practices*

*Enhancing pupils’ SEL skills.* Although only two primary education special teachers had carried out structured SEL programmes, all but one of the participants had made efforts to enhance their pupils’ SEL skills. Most primary education teachers implemented several practices including reading stories or watching films or videos in class and encouraging discussions about the characters’ emotions and behaviours; using drama to showcase the strengths of pupils with SEND, with the aim of improving their self-esteem; putting on “puppet shows with social stories”; and applying group activities to enhance social interaction and cooperation with peers. Secondary education special teachers mostly used cooperative learning and cueing and coaching in order to incite pupils to adopt appropriate behaviour in everyday social situations. A few of them described other strategies as well, such as guiding the pupils to reflect on their own experiences to develop empathy and peer mentoring:

*I usually do it with the older kids, third-grade kids [secondary school] who are more functional, with dyslexia, or some with attention deficit, for example “would you like to be my assistant, to watch over the first-grade kid at recess, the one who is having difficulties, to give them some advice now and then, to be like their big brother at school”. (Smaragda)*

The participants’ efforts to promote SEL had brought about some positive outcomes. The general education pupils became more accepting and demonstrated empathy towards the pupils with SEND: “*The other children were more tolerant, which means that they knew, they understood when my pupil with SEN was out of control, so they didn’t tease him.*” (Myrto). Moreover, the pupils with SEND gradually became more “open” to social interactions and were able to recognise and express their feelings more appropriately and understand the intentions of others.

*I saw a big difference. First of all, this child had attachment issues, that is, because he was also shy, if a child paid more attention to him, he wanted to only be with him. At the end of the year and after I did this programme with games at recess, I saw that he didn’t care, he just went out at recess with all the kids in the class and they all played together (Ioanna)*

*The lack of training as a barrier to implementing SEL.* In several cases the implementation of SEL practices did not result in the expected improvement in pupils’ behaviour. This was partly due to the limited time the teachers could dedicate to implementing SEL as well as to the nature of some children’s difficulties, which prevented them from participating in group activities. However, a main factor that negatively impacted

on the special teachers' efforts to promote SEL was the lack of sufficient knowledge of SEL, since almost all of them had not received such training during their studies: “*No training at all. I mean, whatever I have tried to learn, it was due to my own personal interest*” (Krystallia). This often caused feelings of insecurity to the participants in regard to the practices they used to enhance their pupils' SEL skills and even led them to doubt whether they had the right to get involved in such an endeavour:

*Too many times I am afraid that I might make a mistake with the children and intervene incorrectly. I am always very much afraid of this and many times that's why I might step back. Because I say that if I don't know for sure, I can't intervene 100 per cent correctly* (Katerina).

## **Discussion**

The present study aimed to explore the special teachers' perceptions of SEL and its implementation as well as the practices they use to reinforce their pupils' social and emotional skills. The findings of the study reveal that the special education teachers perceived SEL as a process aiming to the cultivation of skills that enhance pupils' emotional adjustment and social inclusion. They regarded SEL as particularly contributing to the development of skills that are involved in social interaction and promote social participation. This is consistent with other research findings on Greek teachers' perceptions of SEL (Scott Loinaz, 2019). Although the special teachers also referred to the development of self-awareness, self-esteem, and emotional skills as part of the SEL process, they mostly viewed these competencies as attributes that may increase the children's aptitude to cope with their psychosocial difficulties and with the challenges they face in their social life. Triliva and Poulou (2006) found that Greek elementary school teachers placed emphasis on skills facilitating social relationships and on the impact of emotions and self-esteem competencies on social outcomes that are consistent with social norms. These conceptualisations of SEL may denote an influence of the “more collective Greek cultural milieu” where the individual's emotional states are closely connected with the family's and the community's stance (p. 330).

On the other hand, the fact that the special teachers defined SEL largely in terms of the cultivation of relationship skills may be attributed to their concerns about the difficulties of pupils with SEND with these skills and the isolation and stigmatisation they experience (Vlachou et al., 2015). Furthermore, it may reflect an endorsement of an inclusive perspective on their part, which is in line with the definition of SEL by Cefai and colleagues (2018). This perspective appeared in their accounts regarding the importance of SEL in the prevention of emotional and behavioural problems and the improvement of the academic outcomes not only of children with SEND but of all pupils (Buchanan et al., 2009; Triliva & Poulou, 2006; Zins & Elias, 2007). Besides, the participants stressed the need for implementing SEL in the regular classroom, which would foster social acceptance of pupils with SEND, while none of them mentioned the need to implement solely targeted interventions. However, some special teachers considered that integrated interventions would be more appropriate (Cefai et al., 2018).

In addition, the special teachers emphasised the need to create a supportive environment at school that would benefit all pupils. They underlined that providing support and promoting SEL entails a collaborative

work between the members of the school community and especially between teachers. The teachers' suggestions relate to an aspect of SEL which puts particular focus on the classroom climate and relationships rather than just programming and direct instruction of skills (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Zins & Elias, 2007).

Interestingly, the participants particularly valued the contribution of the school psychologist both in providing support to pupils and parents and consultation to teachers themselves and in promoting SEL. Given that special teachers face children's with SEND psychosocial difficulties in their everyday teaching practice, they have been called upon to make use of their supportive role to a greater extent and to undertake related responsibilities (Vlachou et al., 2015), which they are not adequately prepared to fulfill, nor have they sufficient time to dedicate for this purpose. Moreover, the provision of psychological services in schools in Greece is limited (Panteri et al., 2021; Vlachou et al., 2015) and teachers wish to receive more consultation in order to address their pupils' difficulties while the school psychologists themselves recognise they do not devote much time to this aspect of their role (Panteri et al., 2021). It is acknowledged that school psychologists' contribution should not be limited to conducting psychoeducational assessments and providing support through individual interventions, which is often the case. Instead, there is a need for the school psychologists to prioritise prevention and mental health promotion for all pupils, by undertaking related tasks such as consultation, training, and implementation of prevention programmes and practices including SEL (Panteri et al., 2021; Zins & Elias, 2007). The participants' suggestions in the present study are in line with this approach and highlight the need for the placement of more school psychologists in schools in Greece, which would allow them to organise implementation of SEL and provide consultation to teachers. Furthermore, this finding implies the need for further research to explore school psychologists' views regarding their knowledge, training and contribution to the promotion of SEL.

Despite the limited opportunities to be involved in SEL programmes, the special teachers in the study made notable efforts to foster their pupils' social and emotional skills. They used several practices that are suggested in the literature (e.g., reading stories, cooperative learning, coaching) (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014) and have been reported by general education teachers in other studies (Ferreira et al., 2021; Schiepe-Tiska et al., 2021; Triliva & Poulou, 2006). However, they did not use some of the practices they had reported as being adequate to promote SEL such as making use of the courses' content and group discussions in class. This may imply a lack of sufficient time and of knowledge on how to apply these practices. On the other hand, the participants applied the above-mentioned practices with a view to enhancing the pupils' self-esteem and social interaction, which aligns with their perceptions of the purpose of SEL.

In line with the findings reported by Ferreira et al. (2021), the special teachers did not try to involve the pupils' parents to their efforts to enhance SEL although they considered collaboration with them important. This may be attributed to the absence of a school culture that fosters collaboration with the family in Greek schools as well as to the emphasis parents place on pupils' academic outcomes.

The initiatives of special teachers to implement SEL were often hindered by the reluctance of general education teachers to apply SEL activities in the regular classroom. This may reflect the classroom teachers' focus on academic learning and their lack of knowledge on SEL and on its benefits for all pupils. Besides,

previous research has shown that Greek special teachers face difficulties in collaborating with their general education colleagues, as the latter consider them as the ones who are charged with providing support to pupils with SEND (Vlachou et al., 2015).

Another challenge the special teachers faced relates to their limited knowledge of SEL, which made them feel uncertain about their ability to implement SEL activities effectively. Although it has been documented that a considerable number of teachers feel confident to promote SEL (Collie et al., 2015), there is also evidence suggesting that teachers experience uncertainty in teaching SEL, hindering their effective delivery (Buchanan et al., 2009).

Despite the convergence of the participants' views on most of the issues described above, there were some important differences. Secondary education special teachers were less familiar with SEL and presented a more limited repertoire of practices to enhance pupils' social and emotional skills. These findings reflect the lack of teacher training as there is a dearth of courses related to educational psychology and SEL in secondary teacher preparation programmes in Greece, in contrast to primary school special education preparation programmes. In addition, there is evidence showing that, compared with primary education teachers, secondary school teachers (including special education teachers) feel less confident and supported in implementing SEL, which relates to the pressure they experience to cover the syllabus (Collie et al., 2015). Besides, the secondary education teachers who participated in the present study had in general less experience in teaching pupils with SEND. Secondary education teachers also placed more emphasis on interpersonal skills than their primary education colleagues. This may indicate their increased concerns about the social inclusion of pupils with SEND, who may experience several difficulties in forming relationships with peers during adolescence (Gardner et al., 2021). Moreover, Schiepe-Tiska et al. (2021) found that secondary teachers feel more familiar with teaching social awareness skills than those related to self-awareness and self-management.

## **Conclusion**

This study adds to the limited literature on special teachers' perceptions of SEL by highlighting the interrelationship between the development of social and emotional skills and the creation of a supportive school environment as well as the provision of support either through consultation or through the formation of supportive and collaborative relationships between the members of the school community. The findings of the present study should be considered, however, in relation to the lack of generalisability that the use of interviews may entail, since the special teachers who volunteered to participate in the study may have been more open to discuss on SEL or more interested in this topic (Robinson, 2014). The small number of participants is another limitation to the generalization of the findings. Another limitation is related to the breadth of participants' teaching experience. Research evidence suggests that more experienced teachers are more likely to acknowledge their role as 'emotion socialisers' and feel more confident in promoting SEL (Scott Loinaz, 2019). Further research with more representative samples would therefore provide more robust findings on how specialist teachers may strengthen the social and emotional skills of pupils with SEND. Moreover, further research may investigate the impact of teaching experience and school level in the special teachers' perceptions

and the practices they use to promote SEL. Finally, research is needed to explore the special teachers' perceptions on the involvement of parents in the initiatives to enhance their children's SEL skills at school.

## Disclosure

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this article.

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