



Pedagogical Counseling and language teaching of adolescents with ASD in modern Greece

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Abstract. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder puts a significant strain on the family. During secondary education, when the brain is rewired, language learning becomes a challenge for ASD students and their parents. Using this as a foundation, this article's main objective is to know the vision that parents with adolescents with ASD have of the use of Pedagogical Counseling (PC) in their adolescents' language teaching of the Greek language. Through a descriptive qualitative study, with a semi-structured interview of 16 items (n=30 parents) and an in-depth analysis, this goal has been accomplished. The main conclusion that has been reached is that participants-parents of adolescents with ASD applaud the implementation of PC for their ASD adolescents' language learning, leading them to better linguistic competencies. Accordingly, parents will need a constant provision of PC from public schools and the Greek State, without costs and a sufficient availability of specialized staff and resources to manage their adolescents' language learning process with greater ease and flexibility.

Keywords: Pedagogical Counseling, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Teaching of the Greek language, Adolescents, Parents.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder with central symptoms, the reduced social interaction and communication, the presence of limited interests and recurrent behaviors, and has a lifelong impact on the life of the individual. The etiology of ASD remains a topic under discussion and is sought in psychological, sociological and biological factors [1]. Since ASD cannot be eliminated, it necessitates a constant support of the individual and his family throughout his life. Often, education and support of people with ASD have the effect of mitigation of symptoms or even of improving behaviors. However, people with ASD remain in the spectrum and in their adult life, while still experiencing difficulties in independent living [2].

The upbringing of a child with ASD is a significant aggravating factor for the family. Most researches have focused on the recording of the psycho-emotional difficulties of parents of children with ASD, while recent studies have examined the effectiveness of psycho-



educational programs for parents, focusing on individual factors, such as improving the symptoms of ASD in the child and increasing the parent's participation in the programs [3].

Until this date, the ability to alleviate the difficulties of parents of children with ASD has not been fully investigated, with the implementation of Pedagogical Counseling (PC) and its principles [4]. This highlights the existing shortage and justifies the need to carry out the present research. In Greece particularly, there is a vacuum of studies for parents of adolescents with ASD, regarding difficulties raised in language learning and teaching. The question raised here is if the appliance of PC could possibly provide parents with a helping hand during their effort. This aspect is important, since as Rosa et al. [5] express, PC can support and assist parents of adolescents with ASD in various cases.

2. Pedagogical Counseling (PC)

In the context of education, Counseling is undoubtedly associated with Pedagogical science as a branch of herself, since both deal with the individual-student through his evolution and self-realization. Particularly, when talking about PC then the goals and approaches of these two sciences are almost aligned [6]. PC is the science that deals with the child's entrance and development in the school-educational environment. It applies to all levels of education and offers assistance in educational, professional and personal development. It presents particularities depending on the level of education in which it is applied.

In secondary education PC focuses on helping students to cope with the problems they face, with most of them arising from their transition to adolescence. The individual is treated as a whole and can be helped to clarify the goals, to understand oneself, to maintain good relationships with peers and adults, to acquire gender identity, and to obtain a decision-making capacity [7]. In this educational phase, PC is mainly exercised individually. Its' primary goal is to help the teenager acquire his identity, so that he/she can see himself in relation to his/her surroundings [8]. PC is interested in the personal, psychological and biological evolution of the trainee, in seeking his/her identity and his/her professional choice.

The aim of PC in education is the good cooperation among members of the school community. For children with disabilities and their families, PC and consultative skills are seeking to enhance their mental health, to reduce stress so as to realistically address the problem, to gain confidence and to establish positive attitudes towards other people, which will enhance the perception of their personal value.

3. Pedagogical Counseling in Special Education

Developments in special education, efforts to integrate pupils with disabilities into school and social care, and a whole host of other factors, such as technological development and the shift of interest in mental health, have favored the development of PC in Special Education [9]. PC is able to show better results when its basic attitudes and values undertake the whole school context [10]. This emphasizes the importance of the receptivity of the school to the concept and practice of PC, with the most important instrument of this receptivity to be the teacher.

In Special Education, the aims of Counseling at a more general level, need to go hand in hand with the objectives of Special Education, namely to develop the personality of children, to improve their skills and competences, in such a way, as to enable integration in the common education system, as well as the cohabitation with the rest of society [11]. The implementation of PC in Special Education focuses on the attendance of children at school, at



home or elsewhere, on psychological support, on exploration of child-related issues, on design, planning and evaluation, while facilitating adaptation of adolescents for transition from educational grade to grade.

The ultimate goal of PC is not to convert a person with special educational needs or his parents into something different, but to discreetly support and safeguard his indefeasible right to maintain his own uniqueness. Teachers are able to have a pedagogical counseling role, provided they are equipped with the appropriate skills to cope with this dimension, as their impact on the learning process and on their students is important. By implementing the objectives of PC in Special Education, a Pedagogical Counselor-Educator represents the means of supporting the educational process and of managing the diversity of pupils' needs

4. Teaching of Greek language to ASD adolescents

Teaching of the Greek language at the Curriculum of General Education is directly related to communication, as it is based on the communicative approach that relies on meaning, rather than the form. Regarding the education of students with ASD, one of the primary objectives is the understanding of the meaning of communication, as well as the usage of communication skills in different social contexts.

The acquisition of reading and writing has communicative character, but the language teaching is separated from the oral speech, which many students with ASD don't possess and possibly will never acquire it. The cultivation of oral speech is included in the communication skills [12]. It is noted that in the Curriculum of the Greek language remains as a goal the acquisition of phonemic awareness and the conquest of the mechanism of reading. However, the main objective of the Curriculum for students with ASD is the visual recognition of words or symbols, as an alternative way of learning and using the written word [13].

Students with ASD belong to a wide range of differentiated skills. Therefore, they should also be offered a variety of writing approaches, such as the voice method and the visual recognition of words or symbols. Through elementary school some capable students with ASD, like the ones with Asperger's syndrome, may appear as if they have only specific learning disabilities. But, as they enter high school, with its' higher social and communicative requirements, and as adolescence begins to rewire the brain, ASD reasserts its social communication difficulties, due to the higher levels of cognitive demand [14]. Generally, special emphasis is put on the visualized presentation of activities, since in ASD students the visual channel is the predominant channel of pulse acquisition and processing [15].

5. Methodology

In this interpretive qualitative study, a case study design was used. When the research interest is transferred to a specific, complex and functional situation, then the concept of Case Study is used to characterize the research strategy. This educational research contributes significantly to the development of the relevant educational scientific fields, as the use of its findings can lead to its further application both by the State itself as an educational policy, as well as by the teachers and the parents of adolescents with ASD. In reality, and given the very limited research activity in this specific area the usefulness of the current research is even bigger.

5.1. Research questions. In the present article a specific number of questions are presented, since the attention is focused on revealing these exact results. The study sought to determine

specifically whether it is feasible, with the contribution of PC, for parents to assist their ASD adolescents outside of the educational context in language learning. Subsequently, the following sub-themes emerge with their corresponding 16 questions:

- Description of the current status of special education in Greece and the role of PC (parents' opinion about the provision of special education in Greece, parents' thoughts about the inclusion of ASD adolescents in general classes, their belief about special education schools, whether they have resources or difficulties encountered for their training, provision of PC from State or private parties, how the State facilitates the inclusion of ASD adolescents with training provisions to parents and teachers).
- Teaching techniques used by parents of ASD adolescents and the counseling they have received (PC's assistance to parents for acquiring useful teaching techniques for their adolescent's language learning, strategies and techniques used by parents to develop their adolescent language needs, means used to assess training through PC).
- Evaluation of the role of PC in adolescents' language teaching by their parents (contribution of PC to adolescents' language learning, whether the training received from PC is enough, if PC helps to the implementation of an everyday language program for a lot of time and the response of ASD adolescents to it, suggestions about further needs of ASD adolescents for the design of a better and more successful educational program with the assistance of PC, parents' current insight about the appliance of PC to their adolescent's language learning and their proposals).

5.2. *Research design and data analysis.* For the development of the research a semi-structured interview was created, as a research tool, designed to address a wide range of questions that ask why, what and how of the issue proposed and leading to exploration, explanation, description, evaluation and theorization in context [16]. After the initial design of the instrument and before its application, issues of relevance and clarity were examined. Thirteen experts on the fields of ASD, special education, and teaching validated the interview guide with these exact criteria being assessed. The numbers were estimated by using the Aiken V formula, frequently applied in educational research, such as Muliana's et al. [17], in order to calculate the content-validity coefficient of the items-questions of the instrument, based on the results of the experts' assessment [18]; the results showed a range between 0,92 - 1,00 for both criteria, according to experts' judgment.

Table 1. Aiken's V values

Semi-structured Interview Item	Aiken's V	
	Relevance	Clarity
1. What is your opinion about the provision of special education in Greece?	0,98	0,96
2. What do you think, as a parent, about the inclusion of adolescents with ASD in general classes, or with parallel support provided by the State?	0,97	0,97



3. What is your opinion about the existence of special education schools? Are they sufficient or would you need more resources? What difficulties do you encounter in accessing enriching resources for your training?	0,97	0,94
4. Have you received PC from State parties? If not, have you searched for PC form private parties?	0,92	0,92
5. How do you think the State can facilitate the inclusion of adolescents with ASD? Does the State provide training to parents and teachers on how to work with these children?	0,97	0,95
22. Does PC help you acquire useful teaching techniques for your child’s language learning?	0,98	0,98
23. What strategies do you use to develop your child’s language needs?	1	1
24. What techniques do you use to encourage your child to use his voice?	1	1
25. Have you received training through PC and what have been the means that have facilitated access to this training?	0,98	0,98
26. Does PC contribute to your adolescent’s language learning?	0,98	0,97
27. What do you think about the training received by the PC, to develop your child’s learning? Do you think that is enough?	0,92	0,88
28. Has PC helped you implement in everyday life a corresponding program in relation to language teaching for your own child for a number of months?	1	1
29. How does your child respond to the implementation of the language training program, is there an improvement in his / her linguistic competence?	1	1
30. What further do you think your child needs to design his / her educational program better and more successfully, with the assistance of PC? Can you list your suggestions?	0,98	0,95



31. Are you persuaded to apply the educational plan for the language teaching of your child every day after participating in this research? 1 1
32. What is your current opinion about the appliance of PC in your child’s language teaching? What more would you propose? 1 1

The first sector of the semi-structured interview included seven questions of demographic interest, while the second one about the opinions and attitudes that characterize parents of adolescents with ASD, regarding the teaching of the Greek language to their children with the contribution of PC consisted of sixteen questions, which were open.

The analysis of the data was qualitative, with the descriptive method used, providing the exact description of the phenomenon under consideration.

5.3. *Sample and data collection.* The type of sampling in this educational research is intentional, meaning that it involves selecting only a sample of people from the study population. Qualitative research typically uses *purposeful* sampling, as it does not seek to measure issues, make population level statements or extrapolate findings [19].

The population participating in the study is a group of parents with ASD adolescents (belonging to charity non-profit organizations for parents and friends of autistic people with representation in Northern and Central Greece), with n=30, of which 70% were women. Their ages were from 39-62 years, all residents of northern and central Greece and 50% of the sample was divorced. All educational backgrounds were covered from high school graduates to PhD holders.

Table 2. Demographic Summary of Study Participants

Sample data			
Total Sample		n=30	100%
		n	%
Age		39-62	100%
Gender	Women	21	70%
	Men	9	30%
Residence	Northern Greece	19	63,3%
	Central Greece	11	36,6%
Marital status	Married	9	30%
	Divorced	15	50%
	Single parent	6	20%
Education level	High school	14	40%
	Bachelor	12	46,6%

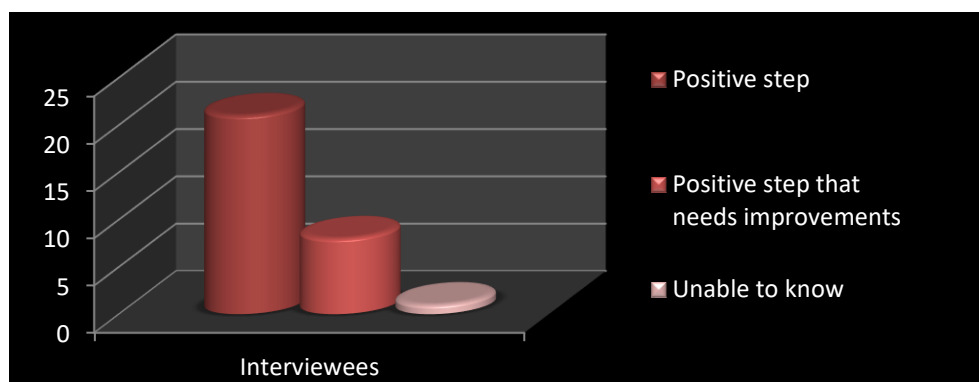
5.4. Limitations. The research was carried out according to the original schedule without any serious problems. Covid-19 made the contact with the interviewees a little difficult, yet this was not insurmountable. Participants were informed about the research as well as about issues of anonymity and security of personal data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on face to face meetings, according to participants' availability. The data collection period started on the second semester of the academic year 2019-20 and ended the final days of the second semester of the academic year 2020-21.

The development of this research in the field of educational sciences involves a main handicap regarding the sample size. The initial virtues of this study were to put on the table the voice of parents with ASD adolescents who are not the object of constant studies in this field. The research was conducted in northern and central Greece and the results cannot be generalized to the total population concerned, since this is a qualitative approach with a relative percentage of participants. The small sample size does not permit generalizations to the entire population of parents with ASD adolescents for reliability reasons.

6. Findings

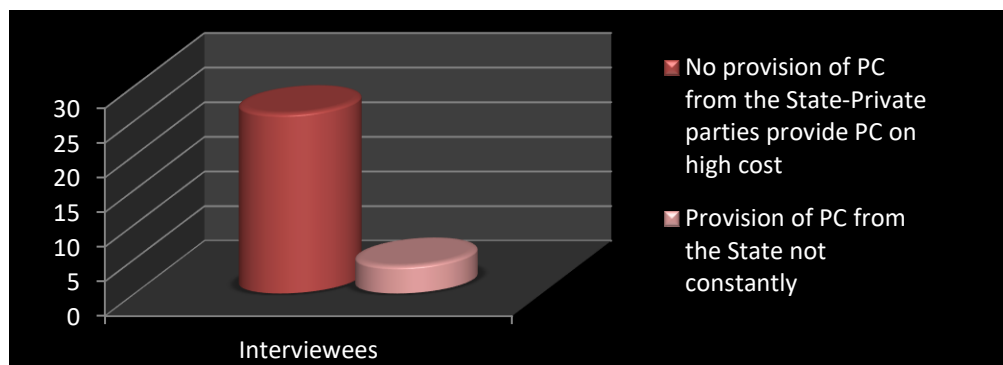
6.1. Current status of special education in Greece and the role of PC. The research data demonstrate that parents mostly find the provision of special education in Greece insufficient (66%, f=20), accepting though positively the effort of including ASD adolescents in general classes or with parallel support provided by the State (70%, f=21).

Figure 1. Parent's thoughts about the inclusion of adolescents with ASD in general classes, or with parallel support provided by the State



Parents' opinions about the existence of special education schools and their available resources are divided to those who find them sufficient (60%, f=18) and those who claim their insufficiency. Yet all of them argue that in special education schools there are no resources and that training opportunities from the State for parents and teachers of ASD adolescents mostly do not exist (73,33%, f=22). Concerning the provision of PC from State parties or otherwise parents' search for PC from private parties, it is highlighted from the vast majority of parents (86,66%, f=26) that they never received PC from the State and they turned to the private sector for adequate help, usually on high cost.

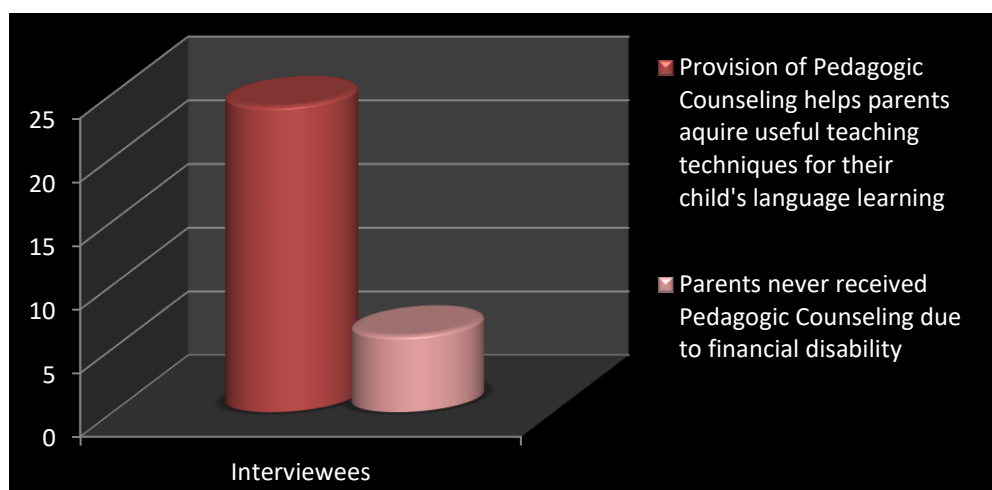
Figure 2. Provision of PC from State parties or private ones



6.2. *Teaching techniques used by parents of adolescents with ASD and the counseling they have received.* Strategies that parents use to develop their ASD adolescent's language needs mostly refer to availability, persistence, perseverance, love and an existence of a regular study program (83,33%, f=25), while the rest of them do not apply any. For parents' effort to encourage their ASD adolescent to use his/her voice, the most common technique used is to ask continuous questions (70%, f=21), while the rest associate the adolescent's voice with the usage of music.

Regarding training through PC for parents and the means that have facilitated or not their access, out of the 30 interviewees, the 19 (63,33%) received it on their own initiative and cost, while the rest did not due to their financial difficulties. Additionally, to the question if PC helps them acquire useful techniques for their adolescent's language learning, the vast majority of the sample (83,33%, f=25) express their enthusiasm and acceptance, even though the access is privately and costly.

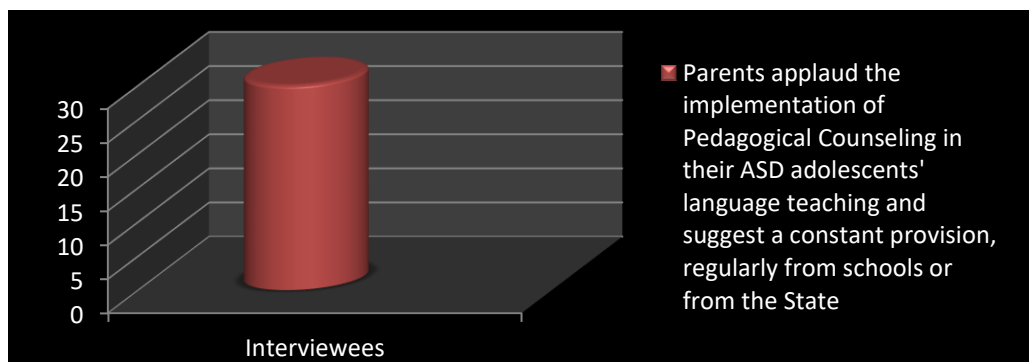
Graph 3. Does PC help parents acquire useful techniques for their adolescent's language learning?



6.3. *Evaluation of the role of Pedagogical Counseling in adolescents' language teaching by their parents.* According to the contribution of PC to ASD adolescents' language learning, reactions depend on whether or not parents have received training through PC. In this sense, the majority of the interviewees (63,33%, f=19) recognize PC's assistance to their adolescent's language learning. Further, unanimously it is expressed that the training received by PC to develop their adolescent's language learning is not enough, while for the majority (66,66%, f=20) PC helped them implement a language teaching program to their ASD adolescents for a number of months or even more. In consequence, an adequate improvement in their linguistic competence show 22 out of 30 ASD adolescents (73,33%) with the implementation of a language training program.

Parents, without exemption, show their intention to apply the educational plan for the language learning of their ASD adolescents every day after their participation in the research, mentioning though that for its' better and more successful design with the assistance of PC there is an urgent call for: PC's free provision from the State; specialized staff available to parents and teachers on a regular and constant basis free of charge and the usage of more visualized teaching methods. Furthermore, unanimously, parents applaud the implementation of PC in their ASD adolescents' language learning and suggest a continuous provision, regularly from schools or from the State.

Figure 4. Parents' current opinion about the appliance of PC in their ASD adolescents' language learning and their further proposals



7. Discussion and conclusions

Greece presents a quite interesting example of a country where, despite supportive legislation, the provision of special education still faces obvious obstacles to its full implementation. Parents positively evaluate the existence and role of an educational program at home, in combination with the PC they have received, as it assists them acquire valuable educational techniques on the language teaching of their adolescents with ASD. Delving into a more specific level, the continuous application of PC methods is applauded and requested by the parents of adolescents with ASD on a daily basis, since they express their strong belief that PC's application directly facilitates language learning in their adolescents.

In short, and taking into account the objectives set, several aspects are concluded. In relation to the objective analyze the current state of special education in Greece and the role of PC, it is concluded that parents' view about the provision of special education to their ASD adolescents regarding language teaching is vague and confusing, showing insufficiency

and shortcomings in its implementation, lack of provision of PC from the State and absence of training opportunities for parents and teachers of adolescents with ASD. This is in accordance with the research of Veroni [20], showing that in Greece during this period of austerity, education provision is affected by financial cuts. Reduced State financial support impacts particularly on those families with children with special educational needs, whose social, physical and educational needs are not met and provides a view towards disability, especially when resources are scarce. Extended budget cuts applied to education brings to the result that it has been largely dismantled. This point is in agreement with parents' view about the existence of special education schools in Greece that seem to be sufficient, yet without appropriate resources. According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority [21] there were 134 special secondary schools in Greece in the school year 2018-2019 and autism was the second most common special educational needs category in these schools after intellectual disabilities, with the 31,4% of the pupils attending special schools for 2018/2019 to be autistic. Alongside, the majority of ASD adolescents in Greece attend full-time mainstream education without or usually with additional parallel support by a special education teacher [22]. Parallel support is recognized widely from parents-participants as a great and supportive step towards the inclusion of their ASD adolescents, with some deficiencies though: a need to provide more class hours for ASD teenagers with reinforcement; more support to be essential in all educational subjects and not only the primary ones; engagement of stable and full-time special education teachers and not substitutes who every year are different, etc.

According to the objective of investigating the teaching techniques used by parents with their adolescents with ASD, combined with the PC they received, current research demonstrates that provision of PC assists parents acquire useful teaching techniques for their adolescents' language learning like: availability, patience, persistence, perseverance, love and a regular study program. In this case a lot of parents point out that the training they received through PC is on their own initiative and at their own expense, otherwise financial difficulties seems an extreme barrier for the participants left. In the same path, parents who are financially able to receive PC recognize its contribution to their adolescents' language learning, still expressing their view that it is not enough. The greatest benefit parents adopt from PC is the implementation of a language teaching program for their ASD adolescents for a number of months or more, which results to an adequate improvement in their linguistic competence. For instance, parents usually are taught to ask constantly questions to their adolescents. This attitude force teenagers to use metacognitive skills, in order to understand exactly what they read, to comprehend the real meaning in each occasion and to use strategies, leading them to language learning, especially with regard to higher-order thinking.

Furthermore, regarding the final objective about the evaluation of PC's role in adolescents' language learning by their parents, it could be highlighted that their willingness is shown to apply the educational plan for their adolescent's language learning, since for the majority there is an adequate improvement in their adolescent's linguistic competence, while for the rest no benefit is recognized, due to the lack of speech in their adolescent or due to lack of provision of PC. The main question that arises is whether there is equal access to education training in language teaching through PC for all parents with adolescents with ASD in modern Greece. According to the interviewees of the research, equal participation of parents in the provision of PC is not guaranteed, since it is not provided free of charge to everyone from the Greek State. Financial burden in Greek families, as an impact of raising a child with ASD is apparent in previous studies conducted in Greece highlighting that due to the severe economic crisis of the preceding decade, families with low socio-economic status

have limited access to health care services. These facts are in agreement with Pappas et al. [23] study, where Greek parents struggle to obtain equality for their children in education provided and in services. Concerning economic indicators, austerity has negatively affected the planning and development of basic resources and services in special education for people with ASD. These effects hindered the positive development and psychosocial well-being of people with disabilities and caused long-term disadvantages [24]. Papadopoulos [25] claims that the lack of access to equal opportunities in education may occur as such services offered by the State are minimal and do not best cover the holistic needs of adolescents and their families. Some attempts have been made in recent years for the overall improvement of the Greek education system, with the aim of including children with disabilities, but progress remains slow compared to the average progress achieved in the European Union [25].

Far beyond, participants-parents applaud the implementation of Pedagogical Counseling in their ASD adolescents' language teaching, suggesting though: a constant and regular provision from public schools and the Greek State; the usage of more visualized teaching methods, as an enormous aid for adolescents with ASD, to improve their language comprehension; the provision of permanent specialized stuff available to parents and teachers on an everyday basis free of charge; their willingness to apply the educational plan for their adolescent's language learning every day after their participation in the research.

Concluding, in modern Greece parents of ASD adolescents are facing the lack of the necessary technical infrastructure, absence of suitable resources, understaffing in schools, no funding, covert or overt acceptance practices and/or rejection of people with disabilities in the education system. This leads inevitably to their strong support and positive evaluation of the implementation of PC in their ASD adolescents' language learning and eagerly call for its' further application.

8. Limitations and future lines

The initial virtues of this research were to put on the table the voice of parents with ASD adolescents who do not present the project of constant studies in this field. Access is limited though to northern and central Greece and the results cannot be generalized to the total population concerned or provide an overall scope of responses, beyond the study parameters.

Further, the research was conducted in Greece during an austerity period with financial cuts and reduced state financial support that affected education provision, particularly for families with ASD adolescents, whose educational needs are not met adequately. Other countries with similar socio-political structures may not, comparatively, undergo austerity in the same way, regarding seamless educational provision to all equally.

It would be very interesting for a future line of research to link language learning research between both ASD adolescents in secondary education and children with ASD in primary education, demonstrating the potential effectiveness of continuous and uninterrupted PC interventions to parents.

One step beyond would ideally be to focus on extrapolating the findings of the present study to other countries around the world. The systematic approach of the parents of adolescents with ASD on a regular basis through PC sessions, as a practice, would give substantial answers for the viability of the specific method. Repeated research is therefore needed in different countries within a range of sociocultural backgrounds for the generalization of evidence that the implementation of PC is able to actively contribute to the improvement of linguistic abilities of ASD adolescents. Consequently, the substantial role



that parents could perform in improving the linguistic competence skills of their ASD adolescents should be further explored, placing them at the center of research.

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