



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EXPERIENCES AND VIEWS OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD) ABOUT THE INSTITUTION OF PARALLEL SUPPORT IN GREECE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the views and experiences of parents with children on the autism spectrum on Parallel Support. The sample of the study consisted of 121 parents who have children with ASD [90 (74.4%) women and 31 (25.6%) men]. The study was conducted from February until September 2017. The survey data was analysed using SPSS version 21 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The results of the study showed that parents are satisfied with the Parallel Support programme and that Parallel Support contributes positively to their children's socialisation. Additionally, the findings showed that parents are aware of the responsibilities of the special education teacher, and the final goals of the Parallel Support their children receive. However, parents seem not to be satisfied with the way special education teachers are recruited. In respect to the way Parallel Support operates in regard to the general learning development of the pupil, the majority of the parents found it to be poor. Finally, parents are quite satisfied with their cooperation with the Parallel Support teacher. In conclusion, the findings indicate that more effort from the Greek government is needed in order to implement Parallel Support for children with ASD.

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INTRODUCTION

The review of the international literature on the views of parents who have children with special educational needs and/or disabilities shows that parents are the ones who are considered to be the ideal/appropriate assessors of the educational process, and the educational services provided by general education and special education teachers (Jinnah and Walters, 2008; Pardali, 2013). It should be noted that the views and attitudes of parents towards inclusion, the educational process, and educational services are affected by many factors, such as gender, age, social and cultural context and financial situation. The observations of parents who have children with special educational needs about the provision of special education services tend to be positive and indicate satisfaction (Tsimpidaki, 2013; Westling, 1997). Parallel support is an educational approach where the general and special education teachers educate and manage the classroom together aiming at ensuring effective inclusion of students with special educational needs and/or disability (Mavropalias, and Anastasiou, 2016).

Generally, inclusion encompasses the ideas about the positive value of children's differences and the importance of pupils being able to influence their school situation, thrive in the school and be a part of the ordinary classroom (Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson, 2011, p.543). In the framework of her postgraduate studies, Pardali (2013) conducted a study in Greece to explore the experiences of parents who have children with special educational needs with the Parallel Support programme in primary education. The participants in the study were a total of 16 parents (15 mothers and 1 father). The results of the study showed that the communication of parents with teachers, and especially with the Parallel Support teacher, was almost on a daily basis and included a comprehensive exchange of information about their child's progress. Furthermore, the study showed that parents identified the perceived adequacy of the Parallel Support teacher as a key factor for the good cooperation between the school and the family. Parental expectations from the general school involved socialisation and inclusion of their children in the environment of children without special educational needs, with the purpose of developing relationships of communication and acceptance. Finally, parents stated that they were happy with the existence and implementation of Parallel Support, emphasising the need for careful selection of the Parallel Support teachers and its implementation from the start of the school year. In Greece

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regard to Parallel Support, children with special educational needs and /or disabilities are integrated in classrooms with children without special educational needs. The goal of this programme in the general school is to ensure that there is full cooperation between the general and the special education teacher (e.g. Gebhardt, Schwab, Krammer, and Gegenfurtner, 2015; Khairuddin, Dally, and Forgett, 2016), for the smoother educational and social inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and /or disabilities, as well as their educational development. Furthermore, the advantages and disadvantages of inclusion in the context of the Parallel Support programme are outlined in international and Greek literature. One of the advantages is the enhancement of the psychological, cognitive and social development of pupils with special educational needs (Drakotou and Zoniou-Sideri, 2016; Galant and Hamline, 1993; Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, and McDuffie, 2005; Salend and Garrick Duhaney, 1999; Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, and Rentz, 2006). The disadvantages that arise and often render inclusion impossible are: a) The inadequate education and training of teachers in special education issues (e.g. Al-Sharbati, Al-Farsi, Ouhit, Waly, Al-Shafae, Al-Farsi *et al.*, 2015; Galant and Hamline, 1993; Johnson, Porter, and McPherson, 2012; Kofidou, Mantzikos, Chatzitheodorou, Kyparissos, and Karali, 2017, in press; McConkey and Bhurgri, 2003; Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, and Goodwin, 2003) and b) The insufficient equipment and logistics infrastructure for the education of individuals with special needs in general education classroom (Galant and Hamline, 1993; Koutrouba, Vamvakari, and Theodoropoulos, 2008).

International and Greek literature, point out that inclusion is the fundamental philosophy of creating a 'school for all'. The goal of inclusion is to advance and promote social justice, equality, respect and human rights. Another key goal is to eliminate discrimination and racist comments by typically developing students in the school environment (Soulis, 2002; Zoniou-Sideri, and Vlachou, 2006). However, in Greece, it seems that general and special education teachers do not know what their role is in terms of inclusion (Drakotou and Zoniou-Sideri, 2016; Kofidou, *et al.*, 2017; Papadopoulos, 1997; Strogilos, Nikolarazi, and Tragoulia, 2012; Vlachou, Didaskalou, and Beliou, 2004), and therefore inclusion is not achieved to a large extent (Drakotou and Zoniou-Sideri, 2016). In addition, in Greece inclusion is considered to be the dominant ideology, but is often not implemented. Therefore, radical changes are needed on an education policy level (Agaliotis, and Kalyva, 2011; Kofidou *et al.*, 2017, in press; Siamanta, 2017; Soulis, 2002; Tsakiridou and Polyzopoulou, 2014; Zoniou-Sideri, Deropoulou-Derou, Karagianni, and Sp and agou, 2006). Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is a lifelong condition characterised by deficiencies in social interaction, communication, a limited range of interests, and processing of sensory stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Defining the terms of “Inclusion” and “Integration” and their difference

In many cases, there is confusion about the terms of “integration” and “inclusive education”. First of all, in Greece Zoniou-Sideri (2011, p.159) mentions that the term “integration” means the systematic placement of someone in something else and the completion of the subject as an independent, integral part of a larger whole. The term

“inclusive education” is the result of academics’ efforts to broaden the term “integration”, which is no longer a goal, but a means of changing social data, since it aims not to restrict the boundaries of educational institutions, but to involve wider social structures. On the other hand, in international data, Meegan and MacPhail (2006, pp.55-56) reviewing the international literature mention that “Inclusion” is a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend, regardless of the degree of severity of their disability. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students). Inclusion recognises every individual’s right to be treated fairly, and to be accorded the same services and opportunities as everybody else. On the other side, the term “Integration” is often used synonymously with mainstreaming to encompass efforts to move students from segregated classes into the mainstream. However, it is sometimes used to represent the ultimate objective of inclusion that is, each child, regardless of their ability, is granted the same educational opportunities in the regular classroom setting.

Kofidou and Mantzikos (2017, p.4) reviewing the international literature mention that the main difference between these two definitions is that “integration” was implemented as a practice in the absence of a theoretical and ideological context and this is the reason of its failure. The inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools required the effort of co-existence with the existing curriculum. On the other hand, “inclusive education” entails the features of “integration”, but also requires modification of the existing social structures, revocation of prejudices, acceptance of dissimilarity, review of standards and of educational goals, reformulation as a radical educational policy, designing of new curricula and training of educators. The purpose of this study was to investigate the views and experiences of parents who have children with autism in regard to Parallel Support, the information they have received about this programme and the cooperation they have had with the teaching staff.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

This survey is based on the experiences and views of 121 parents with autistic children. Of that figure, 90 (or 74.4%) were women and 31 (or 25.6%) were men. In terms of age, most of them were in the 36-45 age bracket (55.4%). That was followed by the 46-55 age bracket (31.4%). As far as place of residence was concerned, the majority of parents lived in an urban area (66.1%), followed by a semi-urban area (21.5%) and a small percentage (12.4%) lived in a rural area. 61.2% of children with ASD were attending public Parallel Support structures and 38.8% private Parallel Support structures. Of those children, 81.8% were at primary school and 18.2% at secondary school (Table 1). As for the sample of children with ASD, the average age was close to 10 (9.60±3.53) and the average age at which they were diagnosed with autism was around 3 (3.80±2.06) (Table 2).

Data analysis

The survey data was analysed using SPSS version 21 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Data collection tool – process

A questionnaire was sent out comprised of 7 questions about the participants' demographic data and of 13 structured questions which examined the experiences and views of parents of autistic children about Parallel Support, using a 5-level Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to Not at all, and 5 to Very much, while 3 represents the mid-point in the scale (Quite a lot) (1: Not at all, 2: A little, 3: Quite a lot, 4: A lot, 5: Very/Very much). This is a quantitative piece of research and all questions were closed-ended (Babbie, 2011; Cohen, Manion, and Morisson, 2011; Mantzoukas, 2004). The questionnaire was generated using Google Forms and was sent by email to all autism organisations in Greece. The study was conducted from February until September 2017. Additionally, the questionnaire was aimed at 2 groups of parents: (1) parents whose children are educated at public or private primary or secondary schools which provide Parallel Support and (2) parents whose children were educated in the past at public or private primary or secondary schools, which offered Parallel Support. Finally, 121 questionnaires were returned.

extent parents are aware both about the duties of the Parallel Support teacher (Avg.=3.57, S.D=1.209) and the objectives of Parallel Support (Avg.=3.44, S.D=1.251). The results of the study show that the recruitment method for special education teachers for Parallel Support programmes is considered to be poor, with the average score for this category being 1.61 (S.D=1.127), and the level of information provided by the Differential Diagnosis and Support Centres also received a low score (Avg.=2.43, S.D=1.309). The same table shows that the way in which Parallel Support functions for the general learning development of pupils does not attract a high score (Avg.=2.78, S.D=1.239). Views about Parallel Support compared to teaching in the general classroom for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder also garnered a high score, with the average score for the specific category being 3.95 (S.D=1.031). Collaboration with the Parallel Support teacher received a quite satisfactory score (Avg.=3.92, S.D=1.225), as did the way in which teachers help solve problems (Avg.=3.02, S.D=1.457) and how up-to-date they are (Avg.=3.28, S.D=1.630).

Table 1. Demographics

Variable	Category	Total	Percentage of the sample
Gender	Males	31	25,6
	Females	90	74,4
Age	Under 25	1	8
	25-35	12	9,9
	36-45	67	55,4
	46-55	38	31,4
	Over 56	3	2,5
Place of residence	Urban	80	66,1
	Suburban	26	21,5
	Rural	15	12,4
Parallel Support	Public	74	61,2
	Private	47	38,8
School / framework that the child is attending	Elementary school	99	81,8
	Secondary school	22	18,2

Table 2. Age of children and age of autism diagnosis

Average	St and ard Deviation
9,60	3,536
3,80	2,064

Table 3. The experiences and views of parents of children with ASD about the institution of Parallel Support

	Average	St and ard Deviation
Do you believe that the parallel support benefits students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)?	4,28	1,020
Do you think that Parallel Support promotes the socialisation of children manifesting ASD?	4,11	1,066
Are you aware of the duties of the Special Instructors of Parallel support in the framework of co-teaching?	3,57	1,209
How familiar are you with the ultimate goals of Parallel Support?	3,44	1,251
Are you satisfied with the way the special trainers are selected and appointed in the Parallel Support?	1,61	1,127
Have you been duly informed as to the specific framework of education of your child by the proper Public authority (KEDDY) Centre of Differential Diagnosis and Support of Special Education Educators?	2,43	1,309
Do you consider the function of the institution of Parallel Support adequate for the general learning progress of the student?	2,78	1,239
Do you agree with the idea of the institution of Parallel Support which allows the children with ASD to be taught in a regular school class?	3,95	1,031
Do you find the cooperation with the teacher of Parallel Support satisfactory?	3,92	1,225
Does the teacher of Parallel Support help you in solving issues that may arise at home with your child?	3,02	1,457
Do you provide information to the teacher of Parallel Support or even to the general education teacher of the school concerning your child's talents or needs?	4,09	1,052
Are there regular and frequent meetings with the teacher of Parallel Support?	3,90	1,169
Do the teachers inform through regular correspondence or notes (i.e. teacher-parent correspondence notebook) as to the student's learning progress and behaviour in the school environment?	3,28	1,630

RESULTS

It was observed that parents considered Parallel Support to be very good (Avg.=4.28, S.D=1.020) and that it helped with their children's socialisation (Avg.=4.11, S.D=1.066). To a large

Lastly, to a great extent parents collaborate in diverse ways with the special education teacher and with the general teacher (Avg.=4.09, S.D=1.052), and there are also frequent meetings with the special education teacher (Avg.=3.90, S.D=1.169) (Table 3).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences and views of parents of children with ASD about the institution of Parallel Support. The results of this study are largely in agreement with the previous investigations. Parents of children on the autism spectrum who have received Parallel Support viewed that support as very beneficial for their children, and believed that it significantly contributed to their children becoming socialised, as it provides their children the opportunity to be taught in the general classroom (Galant and Hamline, 1993; Drakotou, and Zoniou-Sideri, 2016; Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norl and, Gardizi, and McDuffie, 2006; Pardali, 2013; Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, and Rentz, 2006). Those parents appear to understand and how Parallel Support works in the ordinary classroom, and ranked communication about the general educational development and socialisation of their children very highly, referring to communication not only with the Parallel Support teacher but also with the general teacher (Bezdek, Summers, and Turnbull, 2010; Pardali, 2013; Rodriguez, Blatz, and Elbaum, 2014; Ruble and Dalrymple, 2002; Syriopoulou-Deli, Cassimos, and Polyxronopoulou, 2016; Syriopoulou-Deli, and Polychronopoulou, 2017). Those same parents stated they were aware of the role of the Parallel Support teacher and the objectives of such a programme. On the contrary, though, those parents realise that Parallel Support is not sufficient to support their children's general educational development. Those parents expressed an average level of satisfaction with the information they had about Parallel Support from official bodies (Differential Diagnosis and Support Centres) and were not at all satisfied with how teachers for Parallel Support programmes were recruited (Citizens' Ombudsman, 2015).

The findings show that those parents understand and Parallel Support to be something their children truly need, and want effective Parallel Support for them, but find that those officials responsible are unprepared to meet these specific needs and to run Parallel Support programmes effectively (Citizens' Ombudsman, 2015). We consider that this study only explored a small percentage of the overall sample of parents who have children on the autism spectrum who are receiving Parallel Support (from public and private providers) at primary and secondary schools. In conclusion, it can be said that further political efforts are needed to improve the educational system for the autistic pupils. Additionally, we suggest that parents should be more involved in school activities and in the educational process because through them they will get to learn their child better and thus improve their cooperation with all the teaching staff. Inclusive education is the result of collaboration among the teaching staff (general and special educators) within a general education setting, as well as the parents of students, aiming at the creation of a community that will promote the idea of a school that embraces all students (Kofidou, et al., 2017, in press).

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