"Do You Come to School for One Student Only?": Reception and Resistances to the Implementation of Parallel Support of Disabled Students in Greece

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Abstract

The institution of parallel support has functioned in Greece for the past years as a "Program of specialized support for the inclusion of students with disabilities or/and students with "special educational needs," co-funded by Greece and the European Union. The experiences of educators working at parallel support pertain to both employment precarity and the connection with disabled students in the context of the adaptation of a parallel program to the general classroom. In this paper, the institution is approached from the viewpoint of the personal experience of a special educator and her relationship with an autistic student. The case study of a vocal autistic student who claimed space in his own classroom, illuminates the hidden social aspects of living with a disability in the context of school environments, where classmates and teachers are often unwilling to cooperate. Through a critical view to disability studies that underscores the power relations mediating disability and able-bodiedness,

which aims to mitigate the existing social inequality, this analysis will focus on the reception given to the institution of parallel support, as well as the resistances observed during its implementation.

Keywords

Disability, education, parallel support, autism, anthropology.

Introduction

The title of this paper was inspired by my lived experience as a fixed-term contract teacher of 'special' education. My major duty was to provide *"parallel support"* to disabled students in the classroom. In the Greek educational system, parallel support refers to classwork assistance provided to specific students in cases where this is deemed necessary by the accredited center of assessment. More specifically, specialized educators undertake the support of a certain student during classes. They provide the student with the assistance they need, working at the same time as the class teacher, who is in charge of the whole class. The areas of intervention can pertain to learning, social interaction and the psychosocial domain. In the context of my educational role, a comment was regularly addressed to me by mainstream teachers: "So, do you come to school for one student only?" I answer that I go to school for one *disabled* student. I have heard this question and taken part in the ensuing conversation more than once. Indeed, the frequency in which this question is asked and the density of the questions and answers that follow have stimulated my analytical interest. I think that the question I am asked unveils the difficulty encountered by the educational system and its agents in accepting the diversity that a disabled student embodies in the classroom. Despite the fact that parallel support is not inspired by the principles of inclusive education, I tried to escape the constraints born by the role itself and suggest more inclusive practices. Still, the reactions caused by the intervention showcase

the inadequate acceptance of disability in the Greek school. In the present paper, I argue that the underestimation of inclusive practices stems from the logocentrism that characterizes the Greek educational system. The latter delimits the body, represses affect, and focuses on reason. In this context, art education in Greece is also undermined. Thus, while the article does not target art education specifically, it nevertheless pertains to it. In the context of my educational work, I suggested several art activities, such as visualization and dramatization of certain texts, so that they can be accessible by students with autism or learning difficulties. Through the experience of an autistic student, I will attempt to show the ethical and political significance of a pedagogical trope that embraces experience rather than denying it, and welcomes expression rather than suppressing it.

As mentioned above, the thoughts presented here have arisen from my working experience as a "special" educator, but they are also framed by social anthropology, which is close to my "familiar" culture. This attempt falls into the paradigm of "anthropology at home" and the movement of a reflective anthropology. Anthropology at home emerged as a result of rearrangements regarding epistemological issues of subjectivism/objectivism (Madianou, 2011). These contemporary turns of ethnographic research deal with more complex relationships between the anthropologist and her subjective experiences in the field she studies. The reading of students' agency may bring forth the system of social relations which is not visible otherwise. Very few studies conducted in Greece address the education provided to disabled students from the point of view of the students themselves (Vlachou A. & Papananou, 2015; Lampropoulou, 1997; Soulis & Floridis, 2010). In the last section of the article I examine the case of an autistic student, who was eager to communicate his sensory sensitivities to his classmates and teachers in order to explain his social behavior. I argue that his intervention challenges crucially the current approaches to the education of disabled students in Greece and it calls for action leading to the modification of their social environment according to their needs and desires.

In the late 1970s and during the 1980s, the social model and such movements as disability rights generated a discussion around disability as a difference that socially defines individuals. Through a materialist approach, a separation between *impairment* and *disability* was proposed predominantly in the United Kingdom by activists such as Vic Finkelstein and Michael Oliver (1990). This came as a reaction to the medical model, which viewed disability as an individual "tragedy." According to this distinction, it is the burdens posited by the social environment that produces disability, rather than impairment itself. Impairment is the physical fact that someone misses, for example, a hand or a leg, while disability signifies the social procedures that convert impairment to a disadvantage, creating environmental, economic and other obstacles to accessibility and social inclusion. It is thus understood that the cause for disabled people's exclusion is not their physical impairment, but the society's inability to take their needs into consideration. The social model has been a point of reference for a lot of claims, and remains a determining contribution to the discussion on the significance of disability in social life.

Thanks to critical reconsideration and disabled people's narratives, relevant reflection has widened. So the very distinction between impairment and disability has been questioned, mostly by post-structuralist approaches to disability studies (Thomas, 1999; Corker Shakespeare, 2002; Tremain, 2005). According to these scholars, impairment itself is not natural, but socially constructed, often indistinguishable from disability. It is rather shaped by specific political, cultural and social practices and discourses on able-bodiedness and disability, ability and success. It ensues from power relations between disability and ableism, as it is the institutions that inform bodies and social identities. As a result, disabled people are constructed as embodied subjects through dominant discourses and practices and institutions. For Tremain (2005), impairment itself is "a discursive object" (p. 11). Disability theorists such as Mairian Corker (1998) and Tom Shakespeare (1997) have argued that the social model perspective undervalues the impact of culture, discourses and representations in the formation of disability. Instead,

they suggest that the deconstruction of meanings attributed to disability may contribute to social change. They also stress the agency of disabled subjectivities whose action may exceed existing suppressing power relations. The tension between materialist and post-structuralist approaches to disability is a matter of priority. Although both address discursive formations of disability's representations, post-structuralists find that discourses shape the social reality and disabled people's subjectivities, while for materialists these constructions follow economic and political structures.

In this paper, my concern is to go beyond the disability/impairment dualism. I aim to enrich the social model's emancipating discourse by interpreting ethnographic data on the basis of more nuanced relations between impairment and disability that define the processes of becoming disabled in the context of school. Through the lens of critical, post-structuralist approaches to disability studies, I argue that education in Greece is among the powerful ideological systems, shaping not only the ideological content of classes, but also the arrangement of bodies based on behavioral normativity, and the privileging of reason and logic rather than experience and expression. I will explore how the practice of this institution within the framework of the educational system is produced, and reproduces the dominant organizational hierarchy between disability and non-disability. The materialization of the program has not been approached systematically from the point of view of the power relations ruling the interaction between disability and able-bodiedness, as one of the many elements determining which lives and bodies matter (Butler, 1993). I suggest that an anthropological point of view will showcase the agency of disabled students themselves. Therefore, I will discuss the case of an autistic student, who resisted the silencing of his subject position as disabled. Instead of accepting passively the regulation of his body, he created space for himself, showing that his needs are socially constructed and that they ought to be perceived on their own terms.

Power Relations in the Classroom

The procedures that led to the transformation of the approach to disability and educational institutions of disabled people took place in the USA and several European countries during the '60s and the '70s (Lampropoulou & Panteliadou, 2000). During the decades that followed, the mobilization of disability activists that reframed disability as a matter of rights and exclusion, led to the gradual implementation of the educational practices of inclusion and integration of disabled students in mainstream schools. The first law about "special education" in Greece was enacted in 1981. According to this earliest legislation, the main approaches, as regards to the education provided to disabled students, were that of exclusion and segregation (Lampropoulou & Panteliadou, 2000).

Currently, the education of disabled students has been established in accordance with the international standards for the constitution of "a school for all" (UNESCO, 1994). In Greece, however, the related legal framework was characteristically delayed and materialized with adversities, while the educational practices were applied with weaknesses, gaps, and discontinuities, while facing intense criticism. The subject position of disabled adolescents in the Greek school deteriorates because of these institutional deficiencies, with high rates of school dropout. In this paper, I refer to the case of parallel support for students with disabilities as it currently works in secondary education in Greece. The implementation of parallel support pertains to the logic of the biomedical model, which addresses interventions to the disabled students, instead of fixing the environmental causes that impede their inclusion. In addition, it is a program constructed so as to result in failure of its objectives. I will indicatively mention some of the difficulties arising during the implementation of these programs.

The educators who carry out parallel support are fixed-term contract educators, usually hired long after the school year has started. They are hired as part-time employees, but their schedule

usually extends to full time. We undertake the education of two, three, even four students who attend schools that may be close to or far from each other. Those of us who work in secondary education take up the courses of our expertise. However, in order to complete the required working hours and coordinate the timetables of two or more schools, we resort to various adaptations, such as not attending to students during all the classes needed, or even attending to them during classes that do not pertain to our expertise. Moreover, we collaborate with a lot of educators, and we spend breaks between classes commuting from one school to another. Within such fragmentation of the parallel support educator and her activities, the program leaves no time for her collaboration with general course educators. Hence, the possibility to jointly design lesson plans and implement co-teaching or other modifications in pedagogical techniques is eliminated. Furthermore, the potential of intervention is complicated by labor precarity and the fact that we are late to class, arriving when the lesson has already started and has been structured. Most of these issues have been pointed out by pertinent institutions, such as the Greek Ombudsman, after grievances filed by parents of disabled students (Greek Ombudsman, Conclusion no 3094/03, no 4, para. 6).

The causes suggested by relevant literature regarding the deficiencies in special education policies in general include the absence of supportive structures (Lampropoulou & Padeliadu, 1995), the lack of equipment and funding (Koutrouba et al, 2008), the inadequate training of mainstream teachers (Avramidis, et al., 2000; Bowman, 1986; Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010; Koutrouba et al., 2008), the attitudes and beliefs of teachers in regards to inclusive practices and other educational methods related to the education of disabled people (Sideri & Vlachou, 2006). These studies focus on the institutional deficiencies which impede the education of disabled students in the Greek school.

I return to the initial question, seeking the origins of this marginalization. I believe that what lies at the core of the question, "why do I come to school for one student only," is the resistance

of (able-bodied) educators against accepting the diversity of disability. Moreover, I want to suggest that this arises from the existing social hierarchy between disability and non-disability. Similarly, there are more edgy reactions articulated in questions such as "why should we modify the lesson for one child" or "why should I be lenient with one student and not with the other ones." I will attempt to demonstrate what should probably be self-evident: the significance of modifying the classroom environment for one student through the experience of one of my students. Wishing to explore how everyday life is experienced by disabled students themselves, I will focus on one student's narration about the ways in which he experiences his school life. Both he and his mother have granted me their consent to theoretically discuss the student's lived experiences.

The representation of disability in language and, more specifically, the words one chooses to define it is a debatable issue. I choose to refer to disabled and autistic students as these terms have been chosen by the population. One additional reason that contributed to my choice is that the student to whose experiences I recall in my text, had also adopted a similarly militant stance regarding the visibility of his autism. In what follows, I will try to analyze what this atypical stance of a disabled student represents; that is, the fact that his agency resists victimization and goes beyond the restrictions of the existing social structures.

Visible and Invisible Differences of an Autistic Student

I met Paris two years ago, when I was doing my service at a junior high school. Paris was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, but he was usually identified as an autistic person. Hence, I will utilize the autistic identity as a tool of political positionality as a point of departure from which a position in discourse, and hence social recognition, is asserted. Paris had already done great work cultivating his skills and managing his difficulties, which ranged in a spectrum of social, communicational and sensory issues. I will mention some of them, not in order to glean

symptoms, as the biomedical model would suggest. To the contrary, I believe that each and every one of these particularities can be experienced as ways in which a social environment such as a school classroom can widen its horizons regarding what is "normal" and what is not, and intervene in order to problematize these distinctions.

Paris finds it impossible to respond to certain social signals and often has difficulty in understanding sarcasm and idioms, despite the fact that he is fond of humor. However, he eagerly obeys certain social rules, which he learned as mandatory, and can get quite judgmental when they are not followed by everyone in the same disciplined manner. He finds it difficult to accept ambiguous social rules. Non-structured activities, such as excursions, produce cognitive confusion and anxiety. Nevertheless, he does face the small problems of everyday life successfully.

Due to the aforementioned, or rather thanks to them, his behavior was sometimes deemed incompatible with his classmates' knowledge of social interaction. For this reason, the student presented an insistent and conscious need to inform his classmates about what autism means and how it affects his life. His self-confidence won over any hesitation that emerged in his close environment regarding this presentation. It is true that disabled people are circumscribed to a certain passivity by their position as biopolitical subjects subjected to the objectifying gaze of medical knowledge/power and the procedures of examination, diagnosis, and therapy. Yet this student's stance illustrated the fact that there are certain moments, encounters, social relationships, subjective and inter-subjective actions that give rise to their own claims and articulate their agony, their discontent, their pain and their combativeness. As Athanasiou (2011) puts it in the context of illness:

> No matter the extent to which ill people are found in a vortex of illness, no matter how vulnerable this might render them before the objectifying handling by medical entitlement and health systems [. . .] they are agents of a constellation of responses and desires, actions and inactions, even including the voluntary or involuntary be-

stowal of their autonomy. (p. 66, trans. by the author)

The experience of disability is distinct from the experience of illness, yet this presentation constituted such a moment of re-framing individual pain.

In the context of the presentation we organized, the student focused on the lack of information and hence reception and understanding he experiences in his school environment. Mostly addressing his classmates, he talked about his sensory difference, for example, how he could get angry if someone touched him on his shoulder, because he felt touch more intensely and therefore misunderstands it. A high pitched voice can sound really weird to his ears, so he may consider it quite strict, resulting to tears welling up in his eyes. Also, when there are a lot of voices around and he cannot handle them, he goes blank. As he put it: "Sometimes, when people are talking, there is noise coming to my ears. So, it is really hard for me to look someone in the eyes while they are talking and listen to them at the same time. It is exhausting."

The diversity of autistic sensory experiences has emerged in contemporary explorations thanks to the narratives by autistic people (Stillman, 2009; Tammet, 2013). They illustrate the decisive significance born by the social environment regarding a person's life, both as an origin of sensory experiences and as a carrier of knowledge and understanding over the sensitivities to which they are expected to align themselves. These descriptions of sensory experiences are common experiences of every student. When they are experienced by Paris, however, these moments become idiosyncratic, even painful. Classmates' voices, nudges during the break, and teachers' remarks can be felt as an attack to an autistic student's sensory system, bearing a high emotional cost. The student's testimony troubles the dominant representations of sensory normativity. How should we respond to this invitation and what does the response "this is just one student" sound like after such an exposure to the other's pain?

Paris went on:

I have told you about the stereotypical things I do. Think about yourselves, how you might knock your fingers on the table when you feel nervous. I do such things in more intense ways and I look a bit funny. But at that moment, I probably feel anxious or very excited. Finally, it is hard for me to understand some jokes, insinuations and metaphors and I may get irritated as, for example, when I was a kid and I was told that it is raining cats and dogs, I went mad, as I thought that cats and dogs would indeed fall from the sky.

A common gap emerging in communication is due to the social environment's lack of understanding about the difference of autistic people's processing of sensory stimuli. According to a socially framed reading, what hinders communication between a student and others that results in exclusion from social interaction is not the student's sensory sensitivity. Within the framework of the biomedical model, an autistic student's loneliness would be attributed to the defensive mechanism of autistic withdrawal. However, self-advocating autistic people have responded to all the above in dynamic ways. According to them, this stance dehumanizes people with autism and places them outside of society. The attribution of this behavior to the structure of autism as a clinical entity silences the responsibility born by the social environment and devalues the contribution it could make to bridge such differences.

At the end of the presentation, Paris's classmates were invited to write down some thoughts and feelings regarding what they had listened to and were advised to implement certain activities in order to shape a safer environment for him. His intervention aimed at a modification of cultural perceptions regarding the limits of social behavior, as well as the social conditions within which an experience becomes painful, when it could constitute a meeting point, a field within which we could widen the limits of what is already known. By inviting them into his world, Paris responds to what many autistic people assert, which is to posit acceptance rather than therapy in the center of these relationships. Acceptance comes through dialogue, reciprocity,

and interaction. In cases where students feel excluded from social activities, what needs to be changed are the power mechanisms and social perceptions that create these exclusions.

Conclusion

During the past years, the program of parallel support has been applied in Greece without guidelines and with the structural weaknesses described above. Given the lack of a proper framework, educators resort to the easy way out offered by the biomedical model, such as sitting by the students, hence noticeably differentiating them. Although this closeness is sometimes needed, in some cases it is pedagogically pointless. Within the cultural scheme described above, the addition of experiential workshops and art activities works towards releasing the students' trapped energy. Therefore, what becomes evident is a difficulty in inspiring a pedagogical atmosphere in these classes. During one of these attempts, Paris, as an autistic student who gets annoyed by noise, yelled to his classmates: "Sometimes I feel like leaving this school and going to a school with autistic children, who can understand me." The student categorized himself as autistic, not in the biomedical sense of impairment, but as someone who belongs to another culture where he might be understood. In the general school he experiences a (cultural) clash between the culture of normativity and his own lived experience. And while his own difference is visible, the school's culture seems neutral, in spite of being a powerful ideological system. Attributes and skills such as taking care of someone who is suffering, empathy, the ability to strip off one's privileges in order to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, all lucidly articulated in Paris' claim to his classmates, constitute a contrasting pole within a culture of competition, progress, and individual achievement, or the culture of "individualist competition," as Slee (2013) describes it.

Within the normativities found in mainstream schools, the teachers of parallel support are invited to a head-on clash with these powerful structures, at their personal physical and psychic

cost. Additionally, as the story of Paris shows, the implicated restrictions to the role of the parallel support do not cover the needs of many disabled subjectivities, since the logic of the program derives from the medical model's principles. It might be that the other side of parallel support, which centers on the relationship between teacher and student, partially compensates for these hardships. The empowerment that the teacher can offer to their students, the alliance provided to the student in order for them to cope with a daily life of struggle, the vindication experienced against the loss of meaning they may feel during this struggle, may compensate for the significance of this work at an interpersonal level. However, no matter how hard one tries to escape the restrictions, it remains true that the dynamics which can arise during the implementation of an inclusive system inspired by the social model or beyond it are indeed undermined for the time being.

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Bio

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