

# Challenges and Professional Perspectives for Pedagogy Undergraduates with Specific Learning Disability: A Greek Case Study

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**Abstract**—Specific learning disability (SLD) in higher education has been partially explored in Greece so far. Moreover, opinions on professional perspectives for university students with SLD, is scarcely encountered in Greek research. The perceptions of the hidden character of SLD along with the university policy towards it and professional perspectives that result from this policy have been examined in the present research. This study has applied the paradigm of a Greek Tertiary Pedagogical Education Department (Early Childhood Education). Via mixed methods, data have been collected from different groups of people in the Pedagogical Department: students with SLD and without SLD, academic staff and administration staff, all of which offer the opportunity for triangulation of the findings. Qualitative methods include ten interviews with students with SLD and 15 interviews with academic staff and 60 hours of observation of the students with SLD. Quantitative methods include 165 questionnaires completed by third and fourth-year students and five questionnaires completed by the administration staff. Thematic analyses of the interviews' data and descriptive statistics on the questionnaires' data have been applied for the processing of the results. The use of medical terms to define and understand SLD was common in the student cohort, regardless of them having an SLD diagnosis. However, this medical model approach is far more dominant in the group of students without SLD who, by majority, hold misconceptions on a definitional level. The academic staff group seems to be leaning towards a social approach concerning SLD. According to them, diagnoses may lead to social exclusion. The Pedagogical Department generally endorses the principles of inclusion and complies with the provision of oral exams for students with SLD. Nevertheless, in practice, there seems to be a lack of regular academic support for these students. When such support does exist, it is only through individual initiatives. With regards to their prospective profession, students with SLD can utilize their personal experience, as well as their empathy; these appear to be unique weapons in their hands –in comparison with other educators– when it comes to teaching students in the future. In the Department of Pedagogy, provision towards SLD results sporadic, however the vision of an inclusive department does exist. Based on their studies and their experience, pedagogy students with SLD claim that they have an experiential internalized advantage for their future career as educators.

**Keywords**—Specific learning disability, dyslexia, pedagogy department, inclusion, professional role of SLDed educators, higher education, university policy

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## I. INTRODUCTION

IN Greece there are tertiary institutions which do not admit students with SLD (i.e. the Speech Therapy Department [1] or the Military Academy [2]). The aim of the present study was to investigate inclusion/exclusion practices at both conceptual and policy level for undergraduate students with SLD. The paradigm of a Preschool Pedagogy Department gave the opportunity for examination of their future educational role as well. Students of the present Department are called to teach in Early Childhood Education and sometimes at the two first grades of Primary School.

## II. KEY LITERATURE

### A. Approaching SLD through Disability Models

In the Greek Law [3] SLD portrays an umbrella term which consists of subcategories such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dysorthographia and attention deficit disorder. Given that dyslexia is the most common SLD, in Greek and national bibliography, SLD is used interchangeably with dyslexia [4]. As Riddick claims, SLD coordinates with educational surroundings whereas the term dyslexia has medical origin [5]; for this purpose the term SLD has been used in the present research.

Conceptualization of SLD has been scientifically researched through the *medical model*. The notion that congenital impairments cause SLDs has been very popular in the research of SLDs. Causality and *deficit* theories of dyslexia (the most usual term used interchangeably with SLD) have inspired many researchers into investigating what causes dyslexia and how this could be repaired (or result in less deficiencies, i.e. lessen the visual or phonological impairments) [6]-[11]. Moreover, SLD challenges have also been theorized as *gifts* or *talents*; this consists of a current view of conceptualizing SLD [12]-[15]. On the other side, Yates et al. [16, p.253] postulate that 'learning difficulties is not an essential pathology', therefore knowledge about them can rarely be outright. Accordingly, due to this foggy horizon, stereotypes often may arise; for instance, the misleading perception that dyslexia is related to low intelligence levels remains popular even in our days [17]-[20].

According to the *social model* of disability [21], some researchers support the social construction of SLD and have come to question the existence of SLDs [22]-[24]. Also in Greece, researchers express their doubts on the objectiveness of SLD criteria [25] and their suspicion regarding the

utilitarian use of a diagnosis (i.e. so as to ensure oral exams for University admission) [4], [26].

Elliott [22] notes that parents are reported to ask for SLD diagnosis in order to gain educational accommodations for their child. Society's incapacity in being perfect generates categorizations among the population [27], [28]. Moreover, a decrease in the literacy level of students has been noted all over Greece [29]; thus, *labelling* students with SLD may be the only way to support them.

SLDs are hidden disabilities and the challenges they bring may often be ignored or minimized due to their invisible character. As [30] suggests, people with non-visualized disabilities often picture themselves somewhere in between the disabled/nondisabled debate. More specifically, students with dyslexia may object to describing dyslexia as a *disability* [17].

#### B. Students with SLD in Basic and Higher Education

In school years teachers may have negatively influenced students with dyslexia; school years are mostly characterized by negative, exclusion practices [13], [31]; however positive impact is also possible [32].

Glazzard & Dale [32] suggest that confidence levels may have decreased in pupils with dyslexia after their entrance in Secondary Education; this is the time when writing becomes a procedure that lays full emphasis on structural components of the speech.

Usually, negative past experiences are under a more positive perspective in tertiary education [13], [33]. Quite often, people with SLD may choose university studies for self-recognition reasons [34].

In Greece and abroad, research on students with dyslexia revealed the challenges they meet in higher education (i.e. note taking, organization skills, essay writing), provision issues or resources available to them (i.e. oral exams, extra time for exams, IT support) and exclusion they might face [35]-[37]. In Greece, provision was found to be mostly 'reactive' rather than 'proactive' [36], focusing on oral exams. As a fact, students with dyslexia prefer oral exams [39], [38].

In terms of counselling and mentoring, university peers have been related to offering valuable support to their fellow peers with dyslexia [31]. Moreover, current literature reveals that university counselling services may not be appropriate for students with dyslexia [39].

As for university professors' awareness regarding SLD, this often appears to be insufficient [40], [41]. Professors usually result untrained to support students with SLD and may be insensitive towards students them [34].

#### C. Educational Role of Teachers with SLDs

International data indicate that adults with dyslexia express their worries about their professional role as educators [34]. Griffiths [42] claims that students with dyslexia often fear that they may damage their students' education; this inference is the reason for studies in the field, however no absolute proof of less competence is provided so far, while some result to be excellent teachers [43].

The schooling experiences of students with dyslexia play a major role in the formation of their self-concept [44], [45], [32]. Educators with SLD usually encourage and motivate their students using their personal experience. Additionally, their schooling years guide them to adopt inclusion principles to their teaching [7], [42], [44]; based on their experience they naturally apply differentiation practices [42] and they have an insight on the learning procedure of their pupils [7]. Moreover, their personal struggle may inspire them to create an improved schooling experience for their students [32], [43], [46].

Non-native research has indicated that trainees with dyslexia apply personal traits in their teaching such as creativity and empathy [7], [42], [44]; moreover, they tend to show more *sympathy* to students with learning difficulties [7], [42]-[44], or to 'special needs' students –when compared to their peers without dyslexia– [47]. Moreover, teachers with SLD have the opportunity to apply a *collaborative* model in their teaching while students may offer their support to the learning procedure [7], [46]. However, some doubts occur when it comes to the teaching of literacy (spelling, phonics, reading aloud etc.), as well as regarding the organizational and management issues of the teaching procedure [42], [44], [47].

Current research in the field, postulates that technological innovations are used to support teachers' with SLD teaching and challenges can be dealt with appropriate support and adequate preparation [7], [42]-[44].

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Design

The case study of the particular Pedagogical Department (PD) has been realized through the participation of students and staff of the Department [48]. The exploration of their views and experience has been realized via interviews, questionnaires and observation, implementing a mixed methods research design. This design has given the opportunity for triangulation of the data sources using different methods [49]-[51].

#### B. Data Collection

Data collection tools were devised in order to explore *knowledge* of SLD, the levels of inclusive/exclusive academic *policy* for students with SLD (past and present experiences) and the perception of students' *future professional role as educators*.

Adhering to ethical research standards, all tools (interviews, questionnaires and observation calendar) were piloted before their implementation on the groups of the study. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used.

More specifically:

##### (a) Qualitative methods:

- Ten (N = 10) semi-structured individual interviews with undergraduate students with SLD. Through these, students shared their ideas and experiences concerning SLD (both in school and academic years), as well as their conceptions and emotions regarding their future professional role.

- Fifteen (N = 15) semi-structured individual interviews with academic staff through which they referred to SLDs, the support the University provides to students with SLD and their future opportunities.
- 60 hours of observation of students with SLD, exploring the implementation of inclusive/exclusive policy towards students with SLD.

(b) Quantitative methods:

Questionnaires are designed in five point Likert scale (ranging from (1) 'strongly agree' to (5) 'strongly disagree') and aimed to collect information concerning SLD, inclusion/exclusion policy for students with SLD and perception of educators with SLD.

- One-hundred sixty-five (N = 165) questionnaires are distributed to third and fourth year students and completed during lectures and seminars.
- Five (N = 5) questionnaires were completed by the administration staff.

After being transcribed into word documents, data collected from interviews were examined for content themes, following a thematic analysis [52], [53]. Data collected from questionnaires were coded into SPSS in order to provide descriptive statistics [52], [54]. Data collected from the observations were matched to those of the students' interviews.

From the group of students with SLD, nine informants with SLD reported diagnosis of 'dyslexia', one informant diagnosis of 'dysorthographia' and one participant along with 'dyslexia' reported diagnosis of 'ADD' as well.

#### IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

##### A. Educational Policy for Students with SLD

From the time they get diagnosed with SLD/dyslexia, students' experiences reveal the educational policy for pupils with SLD.

Referring to the use of the SLD diagnoses, students with SLD have an opinion which is worth noting. Based on their personal experience, they expressed their agreement with having a SLD diagnosis; however, they also refer to some negative aspects of the diagnosis.

##### Positive Impact of the SLD Diagnosis

With reference to the positive impact of a diagnosis, three students with SLD talk about the *relief* a diagnosis offers by explaining and giving a name to the challenges, confronting the exclusion they had already been feeling [14]. Three professors agree with them.

'After the diagnosis, I was calmer, I was relieved of the suspicion that I might be illiterate' (Student [St..] 6)

Moreover, the diagnosis works as a navigator for three students with SLD.

'After the diagnosis, I found ways to study effectively.' (St. 5)

'Before the diagnosis, I didn't even bother studying.' (St. 6)

Three students refer to the ways in which the diagnosis

brought knowledge to the teachers on how to support a student with SLD.

'My teacher understood that it was not my conscious choice, I really had difficulty in learning.' (St. 9)

However some students recall misconceptions and stereotypes being expressed by their schooling environment [17]-[20]. Misinterpretations of SLD have been confirmed in the present study as well. Some participants (78% of third/fourth year students, and three professors of the PD) appeared to be misinformed on what SLD means and some misconceptions have emerged concerning the reality of having a SLD. More specifically, almost half (47%) of third/fourth year students along with two professors claim that mental retardation has the same meaning as SLD. Students with SLD are familiar with these misconceptions:

'At school, there were teachers that behaved as though I had something more severe to dysorthographia, they used to come and spell at my ear with a loud voice: when you fi-nish, you s-hou-ld co-me and tell us.' (St. 9)

'People hear SLD and think 'oh he's stupid'.' (St. 8)

'If someone cannot read he is called problematic.' (St. 7)

Two students with SLD refer to the importance of the diagnosis in their evaluation and increase of self-esteem.

'Until third grade I used to get very low grades in every class; after the diagnosis I always got the highest grades. In high school I was the best student.' (St. 3)

Finally, it should not be neglected that the diagnosis gives the students with SLD the opportunity to have oral exams instead of other kinds of evaluation. This way it's easier for them to communicate their whole potential [38]. Eight students and one professor refer to this opportunity:

'This way I get the highest possible mark that I'm worth.' (St.6)

'Oral exams give me the opportunity to show what I'm worth.' (St. 8)

Interestingly enough, in this research, there has been evidence from two students with SLD that a diagnosis is sometimes desirable in order to avoid written examination. Oral exams are widely considered more lenient, especially when it comes to sitting the National exams for admission to Tertiary education institutions [4].

'At the National [oral] examinations I saw students writing with ...their hand in plaster, saying that they got the SLD diagnosis so as to ensure that they would be tested orally.' (St. 8)

Of all the groups examined in the study, the academic staff appears to be the most inclined towards a social approach to SLD. First of all, they object to the way the diagnosis of SLD is used in cases where it does not actually apply. Nine members of the academic staff find it hard to narrow down the SLD challenges to a small number of students with SLD diagnoses. According to their observations the majority of current undergraduate students encounter significant difficulties with spelling and expressing their ideas in written form.

'What we might call 'SLD challenges' are

encountered very frequently in all undergraduate students.” (Professor [Pr.] 7)

‘I’ve seen students’ written work where verbs or other words were missing.’ (Pr. 11)

‘I’ve seen written work by students with the disclaimer ‘I have dyslexia’ which may be of higher caliber than writings which don’t include a similar disclaimer.’ (Pr. 6)

Moreover, the academic staff (9/15 members) of the PD claims that the rigid character of the educational system leads certain students to seek a SLD diagnosis: in their opinion, it may be the case that some students perceive this diagnosis as the only way to obtain the chance of a smoother passage through the schooling system [22], [27], [28].

The academic staff also claims that the educational system is breeding discrimination by labelling students because this is the easiest way to deal with diversity.

‘Some educators are exempt from their responsibility, on the grounds that the student has a problem and not that the educational system is problematic’ (Pr. 7)

In the study, there is reference to the increasing numbers of SLD diagnoses in the last decades. This information leads us to consider the possible influence of institutions involved in or impacted by the diagnostic procedure. This is one of the dimensions of the social approach towards SLD. Five members of the academic staff and three students with SLD make reference to the lack of professionalism or objectivity of the criteria that may lead to a SLD diagnosis [25], [22], [19], [24]. These practices make it hard to discern genuine SLD diagnoses from untrustworthy ones:

‘If you know someone working in a diagnostic centre, then you can easily get a SLD diagnosis.’ (Pr.2)

‘In one diagnostic centre they said I had SLD and in another that I didn’t.’ (St. 5)

‘I had once met a girl who told me ‘oh, I used to have dyslexia’, as if she had the flu and now she got over it!’ (St. 8)

#### Negative Impact of SLD - Feelings of Exclusion

The students with SLD refer to the fact that the oral examination, in spite of offering them the opportunity for equality in evaluation, is also responsible for their feelings of exclusion. Seven students with SLD recall feeling excluded while being orally examined at school:

“My teacher at school once referred to me as a dyslexic student... ‘We now are obliged to examine these dyslexic students and there’s no time for that’ she said.” (St. 8)

Moreover, seven students with SLD claim having felt bullied, ashamed, humiliated, let down by members of their siblings, teachers, and classmates.

‘I was really annoyed at my brother’s comments.’ (St. 9)

‘I remember one day in class, my teacher got mad at me and she had me standing in the middle of the class. She humiliated me on the grounds that I have a problem, my mind is always elsewhere. She concluded that I shouldn’t dare come to class again without having done

my homework.’ (St. 3)

‘I remember one classmate saying to me: why bother reading out loud, you won’t finish in this lifetime.’ (St. 9)

As a fact, humiliation and exclusion can be reasons for deciding to have a diagnosis, as reported by this student:

‘After my parents heard that the teacher had humiliated me, we decided to seek a diagnosis.’ (St. 3)

Some students report feeling ashamed as adolescents:

‘It would take me so much time to read out loud; my classmates would mock me until, one day, I totally stopped raising my hand.’ (St. 9)

‘My teacher used to correct my homework with a red pen, and I was so afraid to open my notebook... If a classmate was near, I was ashamed to open it, I would just put it my bag or open and close it quickly just to see the red corrections.’ (St. 1)

Other students still feel the same shame as adults [36], [37]:

‘I use social media and people often might insult me: ‘OK, you’re 21 years old and you don’t know how to structure a sentence.’” (St. 2)

‘Nowadays we use written communication (i.e. messenger) very often, and I have had bad experiences.’ (St. 6)

‘Sometimes in a conversation I might not understand what people talk about and I’m feeling entirely incompetent.’ (St.9)

#### B. Academic Life for Students with SLD in the PD

##### Academic Challenges

Students’ references to their current academic challenges in the PD, as far as the SLD is concerned, are listed in Table I. Students with SLD have reported their personal coping strategies for dealing with the challenges.

TABLE I  
ACADEMIC CHALLENGES OF STUDENTS OF THE PD WITH SLD; CURRENT COPING STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THEM

<i>Academic challenges</i>	<i>Current coping strategies</i>
Taking notes in lectures (5/10 students with SLD)	non-stop attendance of the lectures so as to achieve multisensory learning borrowing notes from classmates brief note taking with revisions later
Writing assignments (6/10 students with SLD)	dictation system for spoken word using spellers support from classmates –more often– or professors –scarcely– support from people outside the University
Memorizing information (6/10 students with SLD)	reading out loud copying in written form reviewing use of acronyms listening to written information from another person
Concentration (5/10 students with SLD)	silence small and frequent breaks reviewing
Dealing with IT services (3/10 students with SLD)	practice makes perfect administration staff support

##### Indicators of Exclusion in the PD

Some academic practices in the PD do not promote students’ inclusion. For instance, seven students with SLD claim that the ways some lectures are given are not helpful to

them.

‘In some classes the pace is too fast, that nobody understands the gist of the lecture.’ (St. 10)

‘Sometimes a lecture is very monotonous, without any discussion between professors and students.’ (St. 6)

Two students with SLD claim that lecture notes could be more concise if they could record or type them.

‘It would be very convenient if I was allowed to type the notes, I would be writing much faster, however they won’t let you type, they won’t believe that you are using your mobile for typing notes.’ (St. 5)

‘It would be very helpful to be able to record the lecture.’ (St. 4)

However there’s no University policy offering a clear directive on the issue and it depends on individual professor’s good will and preferences.

‘I don’t like being recorded, at least not without my permission.’ (Pr. 14)

The exams’ curriculum also concerns half of the students with SLD.

‘The curriculum is often too large.’ (Pr. 2)

‘Some books have so much unnecessary information’. (St. 6)

While at University, three students still refuse to have oral exams, on the grounds that professors have very little experience conducting them. This fact makes them feel that their learning challenge is not fully accepted in the PD.

‘In one oral exam the professor asked me to say what I had already written, she often interrupted me, I didn’t have much time to express myself, I couldn’t concentrate. I lost many points. It would have been much better sitting the written examination.’ (St. 10)

‘The last time, in particular, I had a terrible experience, the professor belittled me and after that I never want to sit oral exams again.’ (St. 2)

Subsequently (Table II) are presented some suggestions students with SLD made for studying in a more inclusive department. Moreover, within the PD, students may refer to the *Facility of Inclusive Education and Research in Disability* in order to obtain a University document that allows them to be orally examined. All ten students with SLD have come in contact with the professor responsible of this facility. The FIERD addresses students with disabilities and/or chronic diseases. However, the majority of the informants (i.e. 9/10 students with SLD, 10/15 professors and 28% of the 165 students) is not familiar with the above approach; they all share the notion that the term ‘disability’ does not relate to specific learning challenges [17], [30]. The common use of the term seems to apply exclusively to kinaesthetic disabilities.

‘If we apply the term ‘disability’ we imply that the person’s inability to learn is permanent.’ (St. 1)

Thus, students with SLD might feel excluded both from the PD and the support services it provides.

‘The university document wrote: ‘Disabled students’ team’. I felt upset thinking that I could be categorized as a member of a team with this title. ‘Disabled’ is a very strong word, however, later in class, our professor

pointed out that the negative resonance of the word reflects deficiencies on a societal rather than an individual level. Only then I felt relieved.’ (St. 10)

TABLE II  
ACADEMIC CHALLENGES OF STUDENTS OF THE PD WITH SLD; SUGGESTIONS FOR OVERCOMING THEM

<i>Academic challenges</i>	<i>Suggested accommodations</i>
Lectures (7/10 students with SLD)	more discussions about content more time to cogitate more examples used applying more technology support
Notes (5/10 students with SLD)	recording lectures <sup>1</sup> typing notes during lectures more analytical/ interactive notes
Curriculum (5/10 students with SLD)	less material to study clear thematic units interactive material
Oral exams (3/10 students with SLD)	Greater awareness on SLD Less sympathy

Although all ten students with SLD have been in contact with the responsible professor of the pre-mentioned facility, generally, they seem to avoid personal communication with the professors in the PD. The (60 hours of) observations realized in the PD confirm scarce interaction between professors and students (7/28 observations). Indeed ten (10/15) professors of the department report that the only reason students with SLD contact them is in order to discuss the possibility of alternative examination (i.e. oral). Other professors report not ever having personal communication with students with SLD in their academic career.

‘Students may only come to us asking whether their spelling errors will be negatively counted to their grade’. (Pr. 5)

Seven (7/10) students with SLD confirm that the only reason for contacting a professor is to assure oral exam. Additionally, eight (8/10) students with SLD report that they use a disclaimer on their written paper in order to disclose SLD; this way they avoid contact with the professors and they gain objectivity in their grading (i.e. under the atypical permission to ignore spelling errors) with an impersonal note.

‘When it has been necessary I added a disclaimer: ‘I have dyslexia; do not take into consideration spelling errors.’ I must have misspelled the disclaimer as well!’ (St. 10)

‘I always leave a disclaimer so they know...’ (St. 8)

#### Indicators of Inclusion in the PD

As seen in Table I, students with SLD have developed and perfected personal coping strategies (some of which they have already applied during their school years) for dealing with SLD challenges. However the PD community also seems to support these students by promoting their inclusion in its activities. This kind of support is relevant to the support which classmates offer to students with SLD while doing written work in group projects, or through offering notes to fellow students who may face learning challenges. Moreover, *academic staff* appears to be aware of SLD challenges

<sup>1</sup> This strategy is being applied by one student with SLD, however, another one asks for its general application.

according to five students with SLD. In fact, four members have personal experience with SLD and professors are willing to offer help with assignments and notes. *Administration staff* offers support with IT services which may prove difficult for students to use.

'I remember two incidents of students complaining they cannot edit their essays; I spoke to them, we worked together and afterwards they used the spellers.' (Pr. 7)

'A professor once told me, 'if you can't get lecture notes I can give you my personal ones.' (St. 3)

As far as classmates are concerned, only a small percentage (6%) of third and fourth year students reports having supported students with SLD in group assignments. Nevertheless, all ten students with SLD have disclosed the SLD to their friends at University. As a fact, at least six students with SLD seem more inclined to ask their classmates and peer groups for help [31] as far as borrowing notes and correcting written speech are concerned [40], [37]:

'Whenever I worked in a group I would say, 'I didn't get it' and they would explain it to me.' (St. 9)

'I send the final paper to my classmates and they correct any errors.' (St. 3)

'My classmates in my team always support me saying in a good manner: 'maybe you mean that [...]' and that's how I explain myself'. (St. 2)

Professors' sensitivity towards SLD is reflected in the way they tolerate spelling mistakes; students feel that they are being evaluated objectively when they inform the professor correcting their exams through a note [40], explaining that they have e.g. dyslexia and spelling errors should be ignored.

'I'm pretty sure they don't take into account minor mistakes or spelling errors. I prefer written exams, however I always leave a note so they know that I have SLD.' (St. 8)

Six professors also confirm ignoring spelling errors:

'I don't place much weight on spelling errors from all students.' (Pr. 2)

'If I see that they have trouble in written expression, I try to read between the lines, and see what they have understood and what point they wanted to get across.' (Pr. 5)

Additionally, students in the PD opt for having a written examination without SLD influencing their writing as some courses are evaluated through 'Multiple choice items' (10 out of 15 reports from Professors) or 'Right/Wrong' tests (6 out of 15 reports from Professors). Moreover, when opting for oral exams, students with SLD claim that they feel they are free to unfold their whole potential or ask professors for clarifications.

'Oral speech is my strongest talent, I go into the exam fully confident, I simply speak and that's it!' (St. 7)

'During oral exams I can ask the professor: 'I don't get it can you explain what this question asks?' (St. 1)

### C. Students with SLD and Their Future Professional Role in Education

Six students with SLD report that they would like to be

employed in preschool education. The reasons behind this choice may vary: a central motivation is *love for children*, however two students refer to the *lack of specific curriculum* [32] and three students to their *lack of confidence* for undertaking an educational role in higher grades of education.

'I love children.' (St. 6)

'I'm terrified thinking I should teach specific curriculum to students in Primary or Secondary Education.' (St. 5)

'It would require tons of effort to achieve the self-confidence needed in order to work as a preliminary teacher.' (St. 7)

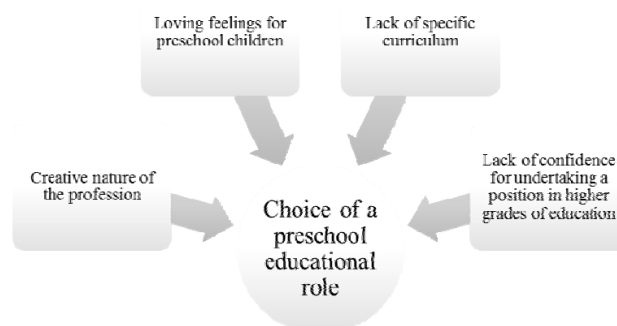


Fig. 1 Reported reasons from students with SLD for choosing a preschool educational role

More specifically, five students with SLD have already chosen to follow a career in Special Education [7], [42]-[44].

'I like Special Education so much, I want to find a way to help people who need a different solution.' (St. 7)

'I would like to do something related to SLDs.' (St. 10)

'Entering this profession, I think that someday, maybe things will change, I could help in that change happening.' (St. 4)

A professor comments that this career path offers them the possibility of encountering answers to their personal issues.

Based on conceptualizations of SLD, students with SLD report *constraints* and/or *equipment* regarding their future educational career.

Accordingly, at this point, it should be noted that three students with SLD opt for theorizing SLD as a *curse* and two as a *gift*. More specifically, the medical model approach has been the most popular framework for understanding SLD in the PD (87% of the 165 students, 9/10 of students with SLD, 3/5 of administration staff, 3/15 of academic staff). Approaching SLDs in terms of *deficiency* and *deficit* [6], [7], is reflected in the use of words, e.g. 'there is this *problem* [...]', '[...] because I *suffer* from SLD.' These quotes from three students with SLD depict a medical model approach to SLD.

A subversion of the popular understanding of SLD as a defect is describing it as a *gift* [12]-[15]; two students with SLD as well as a small amount of third and fourth year students (5%) refer to this conceptualization. However, this approach is inconsistent with the academic staff's opinion

(15/15 people) who claim that defining a SLD, either as a problem or a gift, is distorting the nature of SLD, be it in a negative or positive direction.

#### Constraints to a Future Educational Profession of Students with SLD

As a fact, seven of the students with SLD express feelings of *insecurity* which create a sort of contagion of *fear* regarding their professional future [34].

‘I’m a little bit afraid. I am doubtful as to whether I could manage being in a class.’ (St. 5)

‘I feel a little terrified when I visualize myself in a classroom. I don’t know whether students will pay attention to me or understand me. I have a different way of thinking and I cannot transmit it to others.’ (St. 6)

The fact that students with SLD will be teaching classes related to linguistics worries half (53%) of the third and fourth year students in the PD as well. Four students with SLD seem highly concerned and quite insecure about teaching these classes [44], [42], [47].

‘When I give private classes, even if I’m right, I will Google-check it; I never feel 100% sure that what I’m teaching is correct. However, if I didn’t have dyslexia, or if I hadn’t been diagnosed with it, I probably wouldn’t bother searching.’ (St. 8)

‘It will be difficult reading out loud.’ (St. 2)

‘It wouldn’t be possible for me to teach students spelling.’ (St. 9)

‘I have a fear for linguistic related subjects.’ (St. 10)

According to the view of (72%) third and fourth year students of the PD, lack of confidence is considered to be a main deterring factor for students with SLD taking up an educational role. What’s more, two members of the academic staff and a quarter (25%) of third and fourth year students appear sceptical about them undertaking subjects/classes related to linguistics.

‘I hadn’t thought that they are going to be educators.

Now that’s a problem!’ (Pr. 2)

The same occurs with people of the close environment of people with SLD:

‘People in my family and close environment had advised me against becoming a teacher or professor’. (St. 10)

However other three members of the academic staff appear to be more open to such a development:

‘It depends on what kind of SLD we are talking about.’ (Pr. 6)

‘I don’t think we can reach such general conclusions that all educators with SLD cannot teach nor that every person without SLD would necessarily be a capable teacher.’ (Pr. 11)

#### Equipment for a Future Educational Profession of Students with SLD

Regarding their future professional role, students with SLD make clear that they would apply an instructional procedure with the characteristics of *inclusive education* [32],

*differentiation* of the curriculum [42], [44], *scaffolding* method [55]; all of these point to student-centred and student led education and indicate influence of the students’ personal school experiences.

‘Special groups should be mixed with other groups.

Children’s skills and abilities are complementary to each other and this interaction helps enrich the abilities of both groups.’ (St. 2)

‘Each person follows his own learning procedure; I would love to find ways to help each one of my students according to his/her needs.’ (St. 6)

‘As an educationalist you should know the capabilities of your students and challenge them according to their level or only a little further.’ (St. 4)

Moreover, students with SLD refer to other traits such as love, patience, calmness and taking responsibility that could support their professional role as preschool educators:

‘It is very important for preschool students to have an educator who is happy being with them and loves them.’ (St. 9)

‘As an educator I would be calm, have patience and explain as many times as it is needed for the child to understand.’ (St. 1)

‘It is a great challenge, ‘creating’ well-rounded human beings.’ (St. 8)

Nevertheless, their most important trait seems to be their personal experience and *empathy* [7], [42], [43]. Their empathy is a direct result of their learning effort and psychological state they have been in, during their school years. This trait is claimed to be rooted in SLD. Four students with SLD refer to the effects of empathy at a cognitive level. They tend to describe it as a unique trait for people with SLD [56]:

‘I will try to find amusing ways to convey knowledge.’ (St. 6)

‘I will explain all ideas and find many examples to do so.’ (St. 9)

‘It’s my bonus that I have been through the same challenging learning procedures’. (St. 10)

Six students with SLD refer to the effects of empathy on an emotional level. They claim to be really effective with regards to working in Special Education:

‘I would like my students not to feel insecurity in their class, just because they are different.’ (St. 2)

‘Many people have judged me for having dyslexia; I know how it is to feel discriminated so I will fight for my students not to be in my position. It is a plus having been through this situation because I know what people think of students with SLD.’ (St. 10)

‘My childhood traumas are weapons in my hands; I’ve had so much criticism in my life, I’ve felt a victim and I personally know how it feels.’ (St. 3)

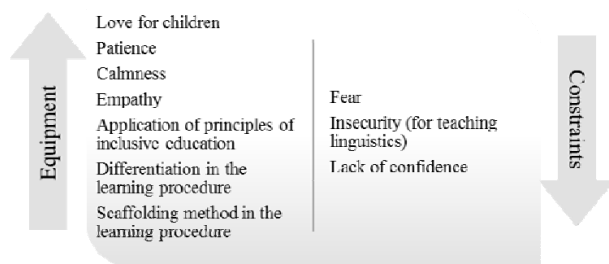


Fig. 2 Reported *equipment* and *constraints* regarding the realization of the future educational role of students with SLD

At this point it should be noted that the academic staff (15/15 members) has discussed the option of a co-operative learning procedure [7], [46] between students and educators with SLD with great interest. The benefits of a procedure that engages educators and students in interactive role changing are multiple: students learn how to support others and they develop their empathy, educators limit their expert identity allowing space for engaging a co-ordinator's role between students and knowledge.

'The learning co-operative procedure places students in an empathic position and thus they learn how to support others.' (Pr. 5)

'Students may correct the educator, learn how to be observant and they are included in the class.' (Pr. 10)

'The educator is not an expert. He is the co-ordinator or animator in the learning procedure.' (Pr. 8)

'As educators we are not invulnerable.' (Pr. 12)

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The present research has examined challenges and perceptions regarding SLD, the policy of a Department of Pedagogy towards students with SLD and professional perspectives for pedagogy students with SLD.

The *voice* of students with SLD has been insightful in the present research. Students with SLD were encouraged to share their challenges, strategies, experiences and personal opinion. In the PD, students with SLD have their own treasured experience since they have activated personal strategies in order to overcome SLD challenges. Nevertheless, the PD appears to be an institution that is promoting an *inclusive* perception of their future educational role; on another level, improvements towards this direction remain to be seen.

In particular, a positive sign of inclusion policy in the PD is the *Facility of Inclusive Education and Research in Disability*, which particularly addresses students with disabilities; in the PD, students with SLD have a Counsellor to refer to. Nevertheless, a student with SLD seems to disapprove the fact that the *Facility* groups together SLD with all kinds of disabilities, while SLD is not widely considered one. In all, students with SLD resort to the counsellor –and other professors– for examination issues. As MacCullagh [39] notices, university counselling services may not be appropriate for students with dyslexia.

The administration staff and peers appear to be attentive to students with SLD, in terms of providing support with IT

services or written assignments. Moreover, provision for alternative exams (i.e. multiple choice, right/wrong type of tests, oral exams) appears to be satisfactory according to students with SLD. However, the academic staff's awareness could be improved; for example, some students with SLD complain about the inexperience in the conduction of oral exams or the prohibition of lecture recordings on behalf of the professors. However, a positive sign is that most of the professors seem to be tolerant to spelling mistakes, so that they do not affect students' evaluation. Moreover, observations realized in the PD confirm scarce interaction between professors and students (7/28 observations). From their point of view, most professors, report that students only contact them in order to discuss the possibility of alternative examination. This insinuates that the risk of disclosing a SLD identity is bigger than the benefits these students would afterwards have in the PD.

Discussion on SLDs, during the academic staff's interviews arguments have arisen such as the multilevels of SLD, the questioning of SLD criteria and the suspicious purposes for having a SLD diagnosis (i.e. assure more lenient –oral– exams); these raise doubts about what exactly determines this *existence* or *absence* of SLD [25], [22], [19], [24]. Accordingly, teaching effectiveness of educators diagnosed with SLD could also be re-examined under the spectrum of *honest* or *fraudulent* existence of SLD at a first place.

As far as the future educational role of educators with SLD is concerned, most professors follow a social model approach. They postulate that –even this dubious– existence or absence of SLD could not possibly reflect one's ability to teach. Confirming previous research [7], [46], from a social point of view, professors of the PD end up discussing with interest the option of a collaborative learning procedure between teachers with SLD and their pupils.

Students with SLD themselves hover between a medical and social approach as far as their future educational role is concerned. On the one hand, seven students-future educators with SLD- express fears about teaching a specific curriculum or specific subjects (i.e. those related to linguistics). Conceptualization of SLD as a deficit [6]-[11], provides an explanation to this; it is related to a societal unfounded prohibition for people with SLD taking on an educators' role. It could also illustrate that students' with SLD choice for preschool education could be socially directed –although two students tend to describe it as a life dream. On the other hand, students with SLD appear empirically motivated to offer an improved education –compared to their own– to future pupils. Half the students with SLD refer to engaging into inclusion practices and using their empathy [7], [42]-[44] at a cognitive (i.e. differentiation of the curriculum, scaffolding method) and emotional level (i.e. tracking and replacement of exclusion practices). Notably, when they refer to emotional empathy, they particularize to future pupils with SLD. These students may prefer promoting the positive traits of SLD and most of them believe that these different traits –that SLD is inherited to them– may be used to their advantage while teaching their students. Besides, preference to the positive traits of SLD can



be supported by the fact that nine students with SLD reject relating SLD to the term 'disability' [17], [30] and two students theorize SLD as a gift [15]. These conceptualizations may have occurred as a response to negative experiences of the past.

Negative experiences of students with SLD often mirror feelings of humiliation and shame in past school and family settings. However, often the traumas turn into *secret weapons* in the hands of the informants, as far as their future educational role is concerned [44], [42], [7].

In the PD, it has been reported that, currently, all students' written language lacks in coherence, expression and correct spelling. Unfortunately, this appears to be a widely spread phenomenon in Greek Education [29]. In a way, current educational –schooling and university– practices give incentives to students with SLD to bring a wind of change, someday, in the educational system.

As Davis [56, p.36] claims 'empathy cannot be taught' as a skill, although there are ways to reinforce it. In that form, future educators with SLD could be valuable to the whole educational population; their unique empathy would guide them to apply their innovative practices, patience and strategic learning. Their fresh perspective towards the learning procedure from preschool education could improve the whole educational system in a way that it takes into account all students.

Future research could focus on the support trainee educators with SLD have in Greek educational Departments in order to overcome the challenges they meet [44], [42], [46] and how could this support be formed in order to guide them to create an inclusive educational environment. As Riddick [43] comments, teachers who themselves face challenges may encourage inclusion practices in educational systems.

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