

## *Case Study*

# A Case Study in a Student with Mental Retardation: Findings and Proposed Intervention

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### **Abstract**

*Mental retardation is a complex pathological condition of the individual, which hinders his/her overall individual and social development. In this context, the role of the school is considered particularly important, as overcoming the individual difficulties faced by a student with mental retardation requires the assessment of his/her educational needs and the preparation of an individualized education program that will respond to his/her particularities. The case study of a student with mild mental retardation through participatory observation contributed to the evaluation of the difficulties she faces and to the preparation of her individualized education program.*

### **Keywords**

*mental retardation, case study, participatory observation, intervention*

## **1. Introduction**

Mental retardation is a complex pathological condition of an individual, characterized by deficiencies or significant limitations in his mental functionality, which are a brake on his subsequent individual and social development. In particular, as typically stated: “Mental Retardation is not something you have, like blue eyes or a weak heart. Nor is it something you are, like short or thin. It is not a medical disorder. . . . Not even a mental illness. Mental retardation refers to a particular state of functioning” (Luckasson et al., 1992, p. 9).

Mental Retardation based on the latest, improved definition by the American Society on Mental and Developmental Disabilities “is a difficulty characterized by significant limitations in mental functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in perceptual, social and practical skills...” (Luckasson et al., 1992, p. 8). Since this includes a wide range of different levels of individual abilities and perceived difficulties, four levels of mental retardation were created to facilitate research (APA, 2000): mild mental retardation, moderate, severe and profound.

The research in this field utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data, for the recruitment of which there is an abundance of used scientific methods. Participatory observation is among the qualitative methods of psychopedagogical research, the method that “used in conjunction with other data collection methods, e.g., in-depth interviews and historical data, while the complementary use of the standardized interview and the standardized questionnaire is not excluded, when descriptive quantitative data is needed” (Kyriazi, 2002, p. 245).

## **2. Description of the Procedure and General Presentation of the Student**

Participatory observation method was used to carry out this work. The process lasted one week and was conducted in a Special Education School of secondary education in the Greek territory. The person conducting the specific research, serves as the director on duty at the specific school, where students with special educational needs attend, and for the specific research she interacted for three teaching hours on a daily basis-within the framework of the school’s operation-with the selected student.

Helen (fake name) is a 16-year-old student of the 3rd grade of the Special High School. Based on her opinion from the Mental Health Center, she was diagnosed with mild mental retardation. Her physical development is normal and she does not face sensorimotor problems. The interaction with the student involved activities in several areas: the student was given a text, which she was asked to read, followed by vocabulary, spelling, text comprehension, language expression exercises. Also, an experiential game was carried out, in the context of which the student was assigned to assume the role of a store cashier with the instruction to give change from her cash register according to the products purchased by her teacher conducting the research. Furthermore, she was asked to solve numerical problems with two-digit numbers, while she was given cards of the seasons, where she herself had to dress her doll accordingly (e.g., in winter she should wear a jacket, boots, etc.), of the time, where she had to match actions (e.g., in the morning I go to school) as well as picture cards from her place, her country and Europe, which she had to identify. Finally, her behavior in the field of social skills was recorded through the group games organized in the courtyard (treasure game, volleyball).

## **3. Recording of the Observations**

Based on the observations, which were recorded in a diary every day after the end of the activities, the particular student was found to:

In terms of her language skills, she herself is governed by relatively good listening comprehension and discrimination but has quite a bit of difficulty in understanding the text when she reads it herself. Her range of knowledge and vocabulary are particularly limited (she didn’t know what “excited” means) and has particular difficulty in understanding abstract concepts of a general content (she didn’t understand the meaning of “homeland”, “freedom”). She is capable of classifying into groups, categorizing, lining up cards in logical sequences and understand the concept of cause and effect.

Her reading ability is satisfactory but the substitution of similar words was often observed (instead of “ran” she read “run”, instead of “wrote” she read “write”, etc.). She does not recognize punctuation, so her speech when reading becomes difficult to understand. Her spoken word is often slurred, she is very rushed to answer and often gets off topic. She does not like to dramatize roles in a story, because she finds it difficult, as she stated.

In numerical calculations, she faces particular difficulties, as she has great difficulty in all operations, especially in those of division and multiplication. The subdivisions of the euro make it particularly difficult for her and most of the time she did not give the change correctly. Also, it appeared that she does not understand the concept of season and time as she dressed her doll in winter with short pants, while she did not recognize either the photo of the map of Greece, or the photo of her island.

Finally, in terms of social skills, she understands and decodes communication messages correctly and is generally cooperative. She likes to be a leader, since she demands that her classmates to do things by giving them orders, but when she is not pleased, she is stubborn and stops listening to any order, she refuses to enter the classroom, she turns her back and has no eye contact. She has frequent outbursts of anger and alienation from her classmates and teachers, often for no apparent reason, and -sometimes- she appears to confuse reality with fantasy: As she stated, the previous day a famous greek singer, N.V., took her by his car and gave her a ride. In fact, it was observed that during her anger and experiencing negative emotions she renounces reality, her identity and her role as a student at school (“I am Lisa Karakazou! I am not Helen! I am not your student!”), while she often talks about herself disparagingly, even abusively (“I’m dumb!”).

The above findings are consistent with the corresponding literature reports, as the difficulty of people with mental retardation in acquiring new knowledge is justified due to the observed deficits in short-term memory, the disadvantageous development of procedural skills of attention-perception (Pennington & Luszcz, 1975) and the difficulty in choosing the appropriate mnemonic technique (Westling, 1986). Their perception is blunt, the capacity for generalizations is limited and their attention is constantly distracted (Stavrou, 2002). Their limited ability to think logically prevents people with mental retardation from grasping the concepts of morality and justice, while the disorder extends to emotion, as cortical control is at a low level, an element that justifies unexpected outbursts of anger, which are immediately replaced by unwarranted enthusiasm (Kypriotakis, 1989).

#### 4. Proposed Intervention

Helen's particular deficits require individualized, targeted teaching in specific areas, which should be built on her positive elements, her virtues, her gifts. After all, every human being has limitations and possibilities and no one is completely deficient, but only partially (Wolfensberger, 1988, p. 63). Emphasizing, therefore, her potential and developed skills and covering up to a certain extent her weaknesses, teachers should contribute to improving the functionality of the student and mitigating the observed weaknesses.

In particular, it is required that she practices at the reading level in combination with muscle relaxation exercises, in order to eliminate the anxiety that governs her and to be more focused and calm when reading. Activities to strengthen her vocabulary, learning mnemonic techniques and frequent repetitions are needed to consolidate the newly acquired knowledge. Also, motivation for further learning is required, as the range of her knowledge is particularly limited. The student must be facilitated to undertake extracurricular activities, which will contribute to her responsibility, the development of her communication skills and the strengthening of her self-esteem.

Wehmeyer (2001, p. 5) often cites Deci's (1975) theory of cognitive appraisal thus emphasizing the importance of self-definition and affirmation of one's worth through the management of challenges, which trigger and control a variety of behaviors. In other words, the individual's involvement in activities from which it derives satisfaction contribute to his self-definition, self-esteem and the reduction of learned helplessness (Wehmeyer, 2001, p. 27), which leads them to leave decisions concerning their lives to third parties. On the contrary, the absence of such activities reduce the opportunities for socialization, which could mobilize creativity, imagination and overall promote the individual (Bitzarakis, 2008).

In addition, practice in numerical calculations is required through role-playing and dramatization, which will contribute to make her responsible, while the presentation of audio-visual material and an experiential game would be helpful for her understanding the seasons, time, geography.

Finally, at the level of her interpersonal relationships, it is necessary to cultivate reciprocity, which is a prerequisite for establishing friendly relationships but it's not self-evident as a concept in mental retardation (Lunsky, 2006, p. 132), which will help her "how to contribute herself to a relationship, to respect the existence of others, to listen to them" (Lunsky, 2006, p. 146). Emotion's management exercises must be applied and a special effort must be made by her teachers in order to eliminate her low self-image through constant rewarding and motivation.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the emphasis, not only in the case of Helen but also of all people with mental retardation, it must be given to the way they interact with their environment, to their needs and not to their inadequacies (Tzouriadou, 2008, p. 10) as an “expression of limitations on individual functioning within a particular social environment” (Schalock, 2004, p. 213).

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