

2nd GLOBAL CONFERENCE on PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCHES, 28-29, November 2014

## Perspectives of Faculty of Education Students on Autism Spectrum Disorders in North Cyprus

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### Abstract

This study aims to indicate the autism awareness of Faculty of Education students in North Cyprus. The main purpose of this study was to obtain more information about Faculty of Education students' knowledge, awareness and attitudes about autism. "The Autism Awareness of College of Education Students in Turkey" questionnaire which was developed by Yasar and Cronin (2014) was used to collect the data. Participants for this study were randomly selected from among the students in the Faculty of Education of a private university in North Cyprus. The departments which was selected to include in this study were Pre-school Teaching, Psychological Counseling and Guidance, Turkish Language and Literature Teaching, Classroom Teaching, Gifted Education, Teaching the Mentally Retarded and Teaching the Hearing Impaired. The survey statements were designed to answer the research questions and provide considerable information on Faculty of Education students' awareness and attitudes about autism. The data from the questionnaire were analyzed with descriptive statistics to understand attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts of Faculty of Education students in North Cyprus and make interpretations to improve the quality of education policies, programs and practices in universities.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Research and Education Center.

*Keywords:* Autistic Spectrum Disorders; perspective; awareness; attitudes

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### 1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), which the term "spectrum" refers to wide range of symptoms, impairment or disability that individuals with ASD might possess, are associated with several impairments in specific developmental areas including social interaction skills, verbal and non-verbal communication skills and

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characterized by stereotyped or repetitive behaviors, interests and activities with onset before 36 months (Levy, Mandell & Schultz, 2009). Recently, there is some alterations in the definition and content of ASDs. In the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), the symptoms associated with autism spectrum disorders appear in a continuum which individuals might experience the symptoms in different ways such as mildly or severely (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Another modification is that Asperger's syndrome is no longer included in the DSM-V, the characteristics of Asperger's syndrome are included within the broader category of ASD.

There are many findings related with the epidemiology of autistic spectrum disorders and there is substantial variability in the prevalence estimates across the studies. In a recent review of epidemiological surveys of autistic disorder, it is stated that most research conducted since the year of 2000 demonstrate an estimate to a median of 17 cases in 10.000 in total for autistic disorder worldwide (Elsabbagh, Divan, Koh, Kim, Kauchali, Marcin, Montiel-Nava, Patel, Paula, Wang, Yasamy & Fombone, 2012). Given the high and increased prevalence of autism in recent years, it becomes more important to provide beneficial education for students with autism.

Since awareness and knowledge about autism increased throughout the world, education of children with autism and more comprehensive education for teachers of autistic children becomes more important (Yasar & Cronin, 2014). Therefore, early diagnosis and early educational interventions for autism should be more applicable. According to Harris and Handleman (2000), when children with autism enter educational programs at earlier ages, they would have more gains compared to children entered educational programs at older ages.

Teachers' beliefs, understandings and attitudes about their students affects educational outcomes of the students. Gargiulo (2003) defined attitude as a tendency to treat in a favorable or unfavorable way towards a given attitude object. Positive teacher attitudes are considered as an important predictor of successful education of children with disabilities including those with autism spectrum disorders (Rodriguez, Saldana & Moreno, 2011; Robertson, Chamberlain & Kasari, 2003). In addition, communication style of the teacher such as assertive and social styles are also important predictor of the attitudes of students towards the lessons (Urea, 2013).

In the light of the literature mentioned above, it can be inferred that it is important to learn about teacher candidates' perspective and awareness about autism in order to improve evidence-based practices related with autism. In North Cyprus, universities do not offer special teacher training programmes about autism. There are only elective courses about autism in departments in the faculty of education. In the department of teaching the mentally retarded, the number of courses about autism is greater when compared to other departments. However, these are also elective courses. Therefore, it can be said that there should be more courses about autism in order to increase the effectiveness of the programmes in faculties of education. In respect to the increase in the prevalence of autism, all teacher candidates should be aware about autism, have sufficient knowledge about education of individuals with autism and have positive attitudes towards autism since teacher attitudes is an important indicator of effective education. As Siu and Ho (2010) noted, when teachers have an orientation or a training about a specific disorder, in this case autism, they have a better sense of teaching efficacy and they have stronger beliefs in themselves that they would be beneficial for children with autism. In addition, Park and colleagues (2010) stated that when people know somebody with autism, they are more likely to have positive attitudes towards individuals with autism. Nevertheless, when teachers have positive attitudes towards autism, their expectations from the students with autism become more positive as well. It should also be noted that knowledge and awareness about autism is important for family guidance. If teachers have sufficient knowledge about autism, they are more likely to notice when there are irregular developmental patterns. If teachers notice such patterns, they could inform and guide the family about getting help from professionals, give information about teaching and learning process of individuals with autism. Therefore, it was targetted to increase awareness and knowledge of teacher candidates' about autism in this study.

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