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SCHOOLS AND SOCIETY IN ALBANIA: PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL APPROACHES TO WELL-BEING AND INCLUSION

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EDITORIAL

Schools and society in Albania: psychoeducational approaches to well-being and inclusion _____

_____ ***Prof. Dr. Belina BUDINI*** _____

This special issue of *Polis* is conceived as an academically grounded yet practice-oriented contribution to the field of psychoeducation in Albania, developed through close collaboration between researchers and practitioners engaged in school, clinical, and community settings. The volume reflects the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Liberal Arts' commitment to advancing evidence-based approaches to children's development and inclusion, while addressing the practical constraints faced by professionals in contemporary educational environments. Co-edited with Prof. Dr. Erika Melonashi, Head of The Department of Psychology, Education and Sports, whose expertise in psychology has significantly informed the thematic and methodological direction of this issue, the edition aims to offer a rigorous, multidisciplinary treatment of psychoeducational processes within the Albanian context.

The education system constitutes a dynamic environment where children develop psychological, social, physical, and intellectual dimensions. The structure and characteristics of the immediate environment have a fundamental impact on their formation, requiring ongoing professional engagement and research in psychoeducation. However, the psychoeducational process often faces challenges related to children's individual characteristics, the level of parental involvement, and the professional competencies of teachers (often limited by insufficient training and lack of institutional support). The inadequate involvement of school psychologists or organizational inefficiency of the system (class size, curriculum, schedules, etc.) can negatively affect children's development and learning. Significant challenges might also arise in the psychoeducation of children with

neurodevelopmental disorders, due to the complexity of these conditions and the lack of specific resources and intervention programs.

The psychoeducation of children, whether with typical or atypical development, represents one of the primary challenges of the Albanian educational system and society. Recent studies show that Albania is undergoing a slow transition toward inclusive education, where social expectations, the lack of professionals, and rapid technological changes directly influence the way children develop academic, emotional, and social abilities. This special edition of *Polis* is a collection of scientific papers presented at the National Conference “**Challenges of psychoeducation for children with typical and atypical development in Albania**” and provides a multidimensional analysis of psychoeducation in the Albanian context. Studies provide recommendations for policymakers, schools, psychosocial workers etc.

Psychoeducation of children with autism is discussed in a considerable number of papers of this edition. As highlighted in the study by Sulaj, Cani, and Mehmetaj, children with autism face significant difficulties in developing social skills, not only due to the disorder but also to the lack of structured psychoeducational strategies in schools and development centers. The study highlights the need to promote effective programs and professional training in Albania to improve the independence and well-being of children with autism.

The study by Kapo et al. provides a comprehensive literature review on classic and modern theories and techniques in psychoeducation of children. Authors critically discuss theoretical and practical issues involving mental health, technology, neuroscience, extracurricular projects, diversity, and inclusion in the education process and provide recommendations for the specific Albanian context.

Along the same lines, the study by Kotherja, Mucaj, and Zhilla emphasizes that classroom management strategies, especially for children with disabilities, are often inadequate and pose several challenges during the learning process. The article identifies effective techniques and strategies that teachers can apply to ensure an inclusive classroom environment. Drawing from contemporary literature and practical experiences, the aim of this paper is to provide a structured approach to classroom management with a focus on inclusion.

The study by Sulaj and Cani shows that support teachers, despite their dedication, are only partially equipped with professional training, thus hindering the inclusive approach in the public education system. This study highlights the importance of an integrated and well-supported approach to strengthening the role of support teachers in inclusive education and the need for sustained policy interventions, including regular training programs.

Case study articles provide a special contribution to this edition, as they provide in-depth analysis of cases of children with phonetic disorder, social communication disorder, and challenging behaviours. These articles are particularly useful for

professionals working with children, as they provide practical hands-on techniques and important reflections on the psychoeducational process for these children.

This special edition also includes two studies bringing family perspectives in the psychoeducational process. Andoni and Haxhihyseni argue that technology, fast-paced lifestyles, and high social expectations are weakening positive discipline, which is essential for quality psychoeducation. The article highlights the urgent need for targeted, expert-led training programs to enhance young parents' skills in applying positive discipline and promoting children's healthy emotional development. Parental styles in the context of psychoeducation are further explored in the article by Rexho, stressing the crucial role of a supportive family environment.

The physical and mental health of children and adolescents is also examined in two studies, focusing on obesity and stress. These two topics represent emerging issues in these specific target groups, particularly considering the ever-increasing rates and the long-term negative effects. In the article "Stressors and coping strategies in a sample of Albanian Adolescents: A mixed-methods study", authors Rakiplari & Ferra provide data from the Albanian context, and recommendations regarding prevention and intervention programs.

The pilot study by Ferra presents alternative education models such as that of TUMO Tirana. Findings demonstrate the positive impact of creativity, technology, and nonformal education in ways that meet the needs of a generation growing up in a reality vastly different from that of their parents. Participation in a free and creative learning environment such as TUMO increases children's sense of competence, autonomy, and social connection, with particularly positive effects for children with atypical development.

The article by Shkodra & Nakuci examines the daily challenges faced by teaching assistants supporting an 8-year-old child with co-occurring Social Communication Disorder and ADHD in an inclusive primary school in Albania. Drawing on practice-based evidence, it highlights systemic, professional, and cultural barriers while proposing training, collaboration, and policy measures to strengthen inclusive education.

The case study by Dr. Sulaj and Msc. Babaramo further examines the use of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapy to address high-frequency challenging behaviours in a verbally advanced preschool boy, highlighting behaviour function and effective intervention planning. It underscores the impact of limited educator training on behaviour management and demonstrates how ABA-based strategies and interprofessional collaboration can significantly reduce problem behaviours and improve social inclusion.

The systematic review by Sulejmani examines sexual behaviours in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, aged 5–15 years, highlighting educational challenges and risks arising from limited understanding and lack of adapted sexual

education. It emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive curricula, educator training, and family support to promote inclusive, evidence-based practice within the Albanian context.

Extending the continuum of developmental, educational, and mental health challenges addressed in the previous articles, the qualitative study by Dahati examines psychological self-diagnosis among young adults in Albania, focusing on the influence of social media, stigma, and limited access to professional care. It highlights how gaps in psychoeducation and support systems shape mental health understanding and help-seeking behaviours, underscoring broader systemic needs for structured, evidence-based mental health education and services.

Finally, the study by European University student, Rexho, examines how different dimensions of parenting styles influence children's self-esteem, highlighting the role of parental behaviour in psychological development. The findings emphasize the positive impact of authoritative mothering and the risks associated with permissive parenting, reinforcing the broader need for informed family, educational, and psychosocial practices that support healthy mental and emotional development.

To conclude, this special issue of *Polis* provides a substantial contribution to the understanding of psychoeducation challenges of children with typical and atypical development in Albania. Articles provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of the current trends, challenges, and opportunities from various disciplinary perspectives, including education, psychology, sociology, social work and healthcare. Findings have important implications for policy makers, professionals, teachers and parents, in terms of improving the quality of psychoeducation for the young generation.

Understanding Social Skills in Children with Autism and the Challenges in Building Them in Albania

Dr. Migen SULAJ

Msc. Alerda CANI

Msc. Emanuela MEHMETAJ

Abstract

This study aims to explore the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of the general public and professionals regarding the social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Albania. Social skills encompass a wide range of interpersonal competencies, which are essential for the social integration and personal development of these children (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007; Mundy & Neal, 2001). The study used a 16-item questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring knowledge, attitudes, and interest in training related to the development of social skills. The Likert scale allows participants to express the intensity of their agreement with each statement, enabling detailed statistical analysis (Boone & Boone, 2012; Likert, 1932).

With a sample of 455 participants, including parents, psychologists, speech therapists, doctors, teachers, support teachers, educators and students, the results showed that 97.1% of participants had knowledge about developmental disorders, while 93.8% appreciated the importance of social skills for children with autism. However, only 32.8% were aware of local initiatives such as “Little School”, while 47.3% expressed dissatisfaction with current methods. A large proportion (78%) believed that social skills can be learned, but 81% considered them challenging to learn. Interest in training and support programs was high (82.5%), indicating a large

scope for developing professional and family capacities. These findings correspond to international literature that highlights the importance of early and evidence-based interventions for social development in children with ASD (Lord et al., 2020; Howlin et al., 2009). The study highlights the need to promote effective programs and professional training in Albania to improve the independence and well-being of children with autism.

Keywords: *social skills, autism, Likert scale, social intervention, inclusive education, Albania.*

Introduction

Social skills represent an essential aspect of children's development and daily functioning, especially for those facing neurodevelopmental challenges such as autism. Children with ASD often experience great difficulties in building and maintaining social relationships, which directly affects their educational, family and social experiences (Klin et al., 2007; White et al., 2007). In this sense, the promotion of social skills is essential for improving their quality of life.

In Albania, the development of services for children with special needs is relatively new and limited by human, institutional and financial resources (Krauss et al., 2014). The educational and health system faces challenges in effectively addressing issues related to the autism spectrum, including the lack of structured programs and specialized interventions in the field of social skills. Public awareness on these issues remains limited and is often based on fragmented or inaccurate information. This study aims to contribute to enriching knowledge on the perceptions and level of awareness that professionals and family members have regarding the development of social skills in children with autism. It also aims to identify the challenges that exist in Albania in providing effective treatments and opportunities for well-structured interventions. By including data collected from a large sample, this study provides an important insight into the Albanian reality in this area. In developing countries, including Albania, access to these treatments is limited. The lack of qualified personnel, didactic materials and comprehensive policies is an obstacle to the implementation of effective interventions. Local initiatives such as the "Little School" show potential for improvement, but are recognized by a very small part of professionals, which indicates a lack of institutional promotion and commitment of policymakers.

Literature Review

The development of social skills is a critical component of the overall functioning of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Social skills include a range of complex behaviors that allow the individuals to interact effectively with others, such as sharing joint attention, using language not only for instrumental but also for social purposes, taking and understanding the perspective of others (Theory of Mind), and the ability to respect unwritten rules of interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Volkmar & Wiesner, 2009). Children with autism often exhibit significant difficulties in all of these areas, which significantly affects quality of life, social inclusion, and the development of interpersonal relationships. International studies emphasize the vital importance of early and structured interventions for children with autism in the development of social skills. According to Howlin et al. (2009), social behaviour, communication, and functional independence can all be improved over time with early interventions based on scientific evidence, such as developmental models, applied behaviour therapy (ABA), and group interventions for social skills training. These interventions help children not only build the skills to initiate and maintain interactions, but also develop the self-confidence and social awareness necessary to function in a community.

White, Keonig, and Scahill (2007), in one of their studies of group interventions for children with autism in school, emphasize that training specifically focused on social skills leads to increased positive interaction with peers, improved social relationships, and reduced undesirable behaviors such as aggression, isolation, and verbal or physical stereotypies. They suggest that programs that include modeling, role-playing, and encouragement to share personal experiences may be particularly effective. Also, the inclusion of peers in training sessions has shown a positive reciprocal impact on the perception and social acceptance of children with ASD by the school environment.

Klin et al. (2007) analyze in depth the neurocognitive mechanisms underlying social difficulties in children with autism. They argue that disorders in social cognition and emotional information processing are essential in the diagnostic framework of autism and should be addressed as a priority in intervention. According to them, many children with ASD have difficulty understanding facial expressions, tone of voice and body language of the interlocutor, which makes it more difficult to understand the intentions and emotions of others. Consequently, Klin and colleagues emphasize the necessity of specialized approaches that target daily interactions and concrete challenges of children, using visual techniques, social stories and training led by assistant teachers or therapists.

The latest analysis from Lord et al. (2020) concerning the long-term efficacy of therapies for autistic children show that adapting the intervention to the child's specific requirements and development profile would significantly increase the chances of functional progress. They suggest that in addition to the content of the intervention, components such as frequency, consistency, and active family involvement are determinants of success in developing social skills. In particular, interventions that occur in natural contexts such as school or home, and that are integrated into daily activities, offer more opportunities for generalization of skills and their spontaneous use in new situations.

Another important area of the literature review is related to the use of technology and visual aids in supporting the development of social skills. Many studies in recent years have demonstrated the effectiveness of computer applications, social robots and virtual reality in training children with autism to recognize emotions, practice dialogues and improve verbal and non-verbal expression in social interactions (Ramdoss et al., 2012; Grynszpan et al., 2014).

These technological tools, when structured and integrated with therapeutic supervision, can reinforce traditional interventions and provide motivating forms of teaching for children with ASD. However, despite developments and progress at the international level, challenges in the Albanian context remain numerous. In developing countries, including Albania, access to these treatments is limited in terms of both economic, institutional and professional infrastructure. The lack of qualified personnel in autism therapies, didactic materials and comprehensive policies is a serious obstacle to the implementation of effective interventions. Furthermore, delayed diagnosis and the lack of functional assessment programs contribute to the loss of golden time for early intervention.

Local initiatives such as the "Little School", independent therapeutic centers or projects of non-profit organizations show potential for improvement, but are recognized by a very small part of professionals and the wider community. This indicates a lack of institutional promotion and systemic commitment of policymakers in the field of early development and support for children with disabilities. Another concern is the lack of standardization of interventions and the lack of certified training for specialists dealing with behavioral therapy and social development.

To improve the situation in Albania and the region, a coordinated effort is required between mental health professionals, educational institutions, families and the community. Raising awareness, providing funds for professional training, and creating intersectoral cooperation networks are necessary steps to create a supportive environment for the social development of children with autism.

Methodology

Study design

This study used a quantitative approach to gauge people's attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about the social skills of Albanian children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). 16 questions total, broken down into three primary categories, were employed in the structured questionnaire:

1. Knowledge of autism and social skills,
2. Impact of social skills in daily life,
3. Knowledge and interest in methods and trainings offered in Albania.

All questions used a 5-point Likert scale for responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree., which is a standard method for measuring attitudes and perceptions in psychological and social research (Likert, 1932; Boone & Boone, 2012). Consistent statistical interpretation and question comparability are made possible by this standardised response format.

Measuring instrument

The questionnaire was divided into four sections:

- Demographics include residency and occupation for comparison of impressions by social and professional groups.
- Knowledge of autism and social skills: questions about participants' understanding of ASD and social deficits.
- Impact of social skills: questions about perceptions of the consequences of social skills on daily functioning.
- Methods and interventions: questions about knowledge, experience, and interest in existing training and practices in Albania.

To guarantee its content validity and clarity, the questionnaire's first draft was assessed by subject-matter specialists such as developmental psychologists and special educators. We made small language changes to improve the questions' understandability after a pilot test with 20 participants.

Standardization of the response scale was applied to all Likert questions, using the same 1–5 scale. In addition to supporting the measurement's validity and reliability, this standardisation guarantees question comparability and numerical interpretation (Boone & Boone, 2012).

Participants and procedure

Convenience sampling, a non-probability technique that chooses participants who are most accessible, was used to choose the study's $N = 455$ participants. The sample included professionals related to children with ASD, students of social sciences, and parents of children with autism, from 12 cities in Albania.

Data collection was carried out through an online form (Google Forms), distributed to social networks, professional groups, and institutional contacts. The data that were processed in accordance with the ethical guidelines of scientific research and participation was voluntary and anonymous (APA, 2010).

Validity and reliability of the instrument

Cronbach's alpha could not be computed since Google Forms only produced summary data (frequency and percentage). Nevertheless, the tool ensured methodological quality by:

- Expert review for content validity (DeVellis, 2017).
- Piloting to verify the clarity and understandability of the questions,
- Standardization of the response rate, which allows for comparability and statistical interpretation.
- Analysis of the percentages that showed consistent and coherent responses within each category.

This approach ensures that the questionnaire is reliable and valid for exploring the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of the public and professionals on the social skills of children with SEN in Albania.

Research ethics

This study adhered to ethical principles of scientific research, including informing participants about the purpose of the research, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data was stored securely, for academic and research purposes only. The study did not involve any direct intervention with children or individuals with ASD.

Results

Data collected from 455 participants through the questionnaire were analyzed focusing on three main dimensions related to the study objectives: (1) knowledge about autism and social skills; (2) the impact of social skills on the daily lives of children with ASD; and (3) knowledge about current intervention methods in Albania and interest in professional training.

Main Findings

- 97.1% of participants have knowledge about developmental disorders.
- 93.8% recognize the importance of social skills.
- Only 32.8% knew about local projects such as “Little School”.
- 47.3% expressed dissatisfaction with current methods.
- 82.5% would like to participate in training on treatment methods.
- 81% consider learning social skills as very difficult.

Autism Knowledge and Social Skills (Axis 1)

The given results showed that the majority of the respondents understood autism as a developmental disorder and the importance that social skills had for children with autism. Specifically, 97.1% of participants stated that they have good knowledge about childhood developmental disorders, while 93.2% stated that they are aware that lack of social skills is one of the main characteristics of autism (see Table 1). The information points to a high level of awareness of the social difficulties faced by kids with autism, which is in line with the global body of research that highlights how social interaction issues are a hallmark of the condition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007).

Seventy-eight percent of participants believe that structured Interventions can enhance social skills in children diagnosed with autism. However, 19.3% of respondents are not sure about this statement, which may suggest the misinformation or familiarity with effective international methodologies, for example social skills training (SST) and applied behavior analysis (ABA) (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007). Furthermore, 89.3% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the lack of intervention for the development of social skills has a long-term impact on an individual’s life, while 81% highlighted the difficulty of teaching these skills, suggesting their perception as a complex pedagogical and therapeutic challenge.

TABLE 1. Summary of percentage agreement with statements on autism and social skills (Axis 1)

Statement	Reconciling Percentage	Likert Scale of Dominance
I have good knowledge about developmental disorders.	97.1%	Totally agree
Social skills are a core problem in autism	93.2%	Totally agree
Social skills can be learned	78%	Agree / Neutral
Lack of social skills affects your entire life	89.3%	Agree / Completely
Learning social skills is difficult	81%	Agree

The Impact of Social Skills on the Lives of Children with Autism (Axis 2)

In this axis, the data reflected strong perceptions of the importance of social skills for the integration and well-being of children with autism. Looking at the results from the respondents, 93.2% agree that social skills deficiencies cause people to isolate themselves which can have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing. Similarly, 89.3% of them, highlighted how the development of such abilities directly influences the degree of independence, emphasizing their necessity in preparing kids for autonomous and fruitful lives as part of society.

One of the most significant findings is the support for early intervention, which is seen as an effective strategy to improve long-term outcomes for children with ASD. This is in line with numerous international research that argues that interventions applied at an early age bring significant improvements in the social skills and overall functioning of the child (Dawson et al., 2010; Rogers & Vismara, 2008).

However, only 59.1% of participants agreed or were neutral with the statement that people with autism can live independently. This finding indicates a limited perception of the potential for independent living for these individuals, possibly due to a lack of experience or sufficient education about transition to independence programs for adults with autism (Wehman et al., 2014).

TABLE 2. Perceptions of the impact of social skills on the lives of children with ASD (Axis 2)

Statement	Reconciling Percentage	Likert Scale of Dominance
Lack of social skills affects independence	89.3%	I completely agree
Poor social skills lead to isolation	93.2%	I completely agree
Early intervention helps with long-term outcomes	-	I agree (implied)
People with autism can live independently	59.1%	Neutral / Agree
Social awareness and belonging are essential	93.8%	I completely agree

Knowledge and Interest in Methods in Albania (Axis 3)

The data show an interesting contrast between existing knowledge and expressed interest in learning more. Only 65.9% of participants stated that they are familiar with the methods used in

Albania to help develop social skills, while 47.3% expressed neutrality regarding satisfaction with these methods. In particular, only 32.8% had heard of the KODDI Center's «Little School» project, perhaps reflecting a lack of information dissemination about existing initiatives at the

national level. It is noteworthy that 82.5% of participants expressed a desire to learn more and participate in training or workshops related to this field. This result highlights a great potential for capacity building and professional development in the field of autism and social interventions.

TABLE 3. Knowledge and interest in training on current methods in Albania (Axis 3)

Statement	Reconciling Percentage	Likert Scale of Dominance
I am familiar with the methods in Albania	65.9%	Agree
I heard about "The Little School" (KODDI)	32.8%	Disagree / Neutral
I am satisfied with the current methods	47.3%	Neutral
I want to learn more	82.5%	I completely agree
Trainings/workshops organized by KODDI	82.5%	I completely agree

Summary of general trends by topic

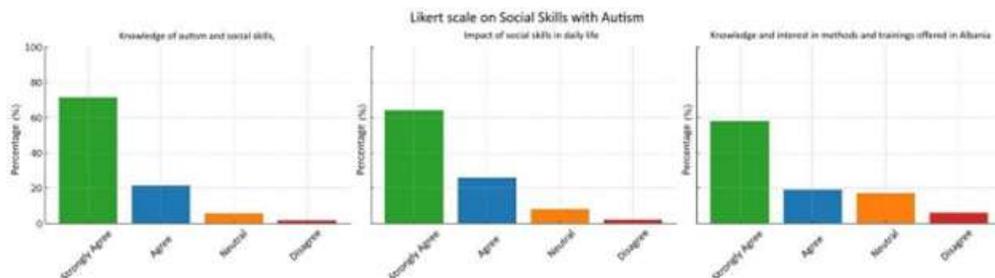
A comparative summary of the percentage of responses by topic of the questions shows that:

- 71.4% of the participants completely agreed with the statements related to knowledge about autism and social skills.
- 64% completely agreed with the statements related to the impact of these skills on the lives of children with ASD.
- Regarding the methods and interest in training, 58% completely agreed.

TABLE 4. Percentage of participants' agreement by question topic

Theme	Completely Agree	Agree	Neutral	I Disagree
Knowledge about Autism and Social Skills	71.4%	21.4%	5.7%	1.5%
Impact on Children's Lives	64%	26%	8%	2%
Knowledge and Interest in Methods in Albania	58%	19%	17%	6%

The graphic below visually illustrates the percentage of participants who agreed with the statements in each thematic category. This summary allows for comparison of perceptions and knowledge about autism, the impact of social skills, and knowledge/interest in current methods in Albania.



These data suggest a good level of awareness and readiness for professional development, but also highlight the need for improved information dissemination and access to effective methods in Albania.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study shed light on a clear and significant picture of the perceptions and practices of education professionals and parents regarding the development of social skills in children with autism in Albania. One of the main conclusions is that there is considerable awareness of the importance of these skills in the social inclusion, daily functioning and psychological well-being of the child. However, this awareness is not uniformly accompanied by in-depth knowledge of concrete intervention methods and existing training and professional development projects or programs. More specifically, survey participants expressed low satisfaction with the current approaches used in Albania for the development of social skills, which indicates a gap between awareness and practical implementation of evidence-based knowledge.

These data are consistent with international literature that emphasizes that interventions for the development of social skills in children with autism require ongoing training, specialized approaches, and institutional support (White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007; Krauss, Gulati, & Soles, 2014). The high interest in training reported by participants, especially by teaching assistants and professionals who work directly with children with autism, constitutes a positive indicator and promises the potential for the development of professional capacities if supported by resources, structures, and programs that are sustainable over time. This interest is consistent with studies that support the necessity of ongoing professional development in the field of autism interventions (Simpson, 2005; Wong et al.,

2015), and especially in treating social skills as a critical component for inclusive inclusion. Another important aspect that emerges from the data is the high perception of difficulties encountered when teaching social skills. Over 80% of participants considered this process to be difficult or very difficult, which is consistent with the complex and multidimensional nature of interventions in the field of social skills. This perception is in line with the conclusions of the literature suggesting that the development of these skills requires individualized, ongoing interventions that address the cognitive, emotional, and communicative aspects of children with autism (Howlin, Baron-Cohen, & Hadwin, 1999; Lord et al., 2020).

Further analyzing the complexity of interventions, it is very important to emphasize that the development of social skills cannot be achieved through isolated training alone, but requires a combination of evidence-based methodologies, functional assessments of children, and the involvement of multiple actors in the therapeutic and educational process. For example, interventions that rely on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) techniques and structured group training programs have been shown to be effective in increasing social interactions but require a high level of expertise and institutional support to be implemented sustainably (Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; Bellini et al., 2007).

The lack of knowledge about currently existing programs for the development of social skills, as evidenced by the participants, also suggests the need for greater promotion of good practices and successful interventions that have been piloted in the country or region. One of the main barriers appears to be limited access to information and resources, as well as the lack of networking between professionals, educational institutions and therapeutic centers. This situation hinders the sharing of positive experiences and reinforces the gap between the practices recommended by the literature and the practical reality in Albanian institutions. These findings coincide with the literature from developing countries, where infrastructural limitations, lack of coordinated policies and trained human resources directly affect the quality of interventions for children with autism (de Vries, 2016; Elsabbagh et al., 2012). Furthermore, this study shows that educators and other professionals are aware of the need to improve practices, requesting more guidelines, practical materials and technical support. They highlight the lack of clear and standardized protocols for teaching social skills at the institutional level. This makes it difficult to ensure quality and evaluate intervention outcomes, which is essential for improving services and building sustainable public policies. International literature has long addressed the importance of standardizing and monitoring therapeutic practices as a way to ensure effective outcomes in autism interventions (National Research Council, 2001; Kasari et al., 2012).

From a policy and institutional perspective, the findings highlight the need to develop national strategies for the development of social skills in children with autism. These strategies should include not only specialised training for

professionals, but also public awareness, support for parents, and the development of supportive policies that promote interventions in the child's natural settings (such as kindergartens, schools, and the community). This ecological intervention model has proven successful in many countries and has been recommended by international authorities as a way to increase the inclusion and sustainability of interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schreibman et al., 2015).

In the Albanian context, these findings represent an important opportunity to develop policies and practices that are more adapted to the local reality, taking advantage of the interest and willingness of professionals for change. Supporting these efforts through collaboration between academic institutions, relevant ministries, NGOs, and practitioners would enable a gradual but sustainable transformation in the approach to the development of social skills in children with autism in Albania.

In conclusion, this discussion underscores the need for a comprehensive, coordinated, and evidence-based strategy for developing social skills. High awareness and interest in professional development constitute a good basis for successful interventions, but more institutional commitment, structured resources, and standardization of practices are required to truly improve the quality of life of children with autism in Albania.

Study Limitations

This study faces several methodological limitations that should be considered in interpreting the results. The sampling method used is of the convenience kind which limits the national generalizability of the results at a national level. While the data are valid for the context of the surveyed participants, they may not be equally representative of all professionals and parents in Albania. This limitation is well-known in social research, especially in contexts where resources and access are limited (Bornstein et al., 2013).

Second, the use of a self-report instrument may introduce biases related to social desirability. Participants may have reported higher levels of awareness or satisfaction to reflect a positive image of themselves or the institution where they work. This is a known tendency in such research and suggests the need for triangulation with other methods such as observation or structured interviews (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Finally, the representation of different cities has not been proportional, limiting the real reflection of the diversity of practices and approaches between urban and rural regions in Albania. This may affect the identification of specific local needs and context-oriented policy proposals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sheds light on an important panorama of perceptions and attitudes towards social skills of children with autism spectrum disorders in Albania. The findings show a high awareness of the importance of these skills in the development and integration of children, but also highlight a significant gap in professional knowledge and the effective use of intervention methods.

In line with the international literature, social skills are not just a set of learnable behaviors, but an essential component of children's well-being, autonomy and social inclusion in school and community (Carter et al., 2014; Bauminger-Zviely, 2013). The need for personalized and multidisciplinary approaches is urgent, especially in educational systems like the Albanian one that are in transition towards full inclusion. Based on these findings, the following is recommended:

Developing Evidence-Based Programs

The design and implementation of structured interventions for teaching social skills, based on the latest scientific models such as ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis), TEACCH or Social Thinking (Winner, 2007), will help improve the social capacities of children with autism.

Ongoing Training for Professionals and Families

Training should aim to increase the practical competencies of teachers, therapists, and parents to implement sustainable and appropriate strategies in the child's natural environments (Brookman- Frazee et al., 2009).

Public Awareness and Sensitization

Awareness campaigns for the community and educational structures should promote the importance of social interaction and minimize the stigmatization of children with special needs. The use of media and digital platforms aids in spreading information and sharing success stories.

Institutional Support and Policy Oriented

Public policies should allocate specific funding for social interventions within the framework of inclusive education. Additionally, integrating social skills into preschool and school curricula can significantly benefit the development of all children (Odom et al., 2014).

Ongoing Research and Longitudinal Studies

Expanded research on the effectiveness of specific social interventions in Albania is needed to build a sustainable foundation for educational policies and practices based on local data.

In conclusion, as Albania moves towards an inclusive education system, it is essential that knowledge and interventions for the social skills of children with autism are structured, resourced, and evidence-based. This commitment is essential not only for inclusion, but for the well-being and sustainable development of every child.

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An overview of effective psychological theories and techniques for children's learning and education in schools _____

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to investigate in depth the theories and techniques of the field of psychology, which have proven to be efficient and successful in the process of teaching, learning and education in the school system. This study is designed in the form of theoretical research by analyzing a database of previous articles and studies carried out on this topic. From the research process, it results that the most mentioned theories, and with positive results in the education of children in schools are behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism, while social learning, experientialism, and humanism are also considered to be of great value. The innovative findings of current studies emphasize the importance of elements such as mental health, technology, neuroscience, extracurricular projects, diversity,

and inclusion in the education process. This study can serve as a good and concise basis for effective educational methods to be considered by actors such as teachers or school psychologists, and can also serve as a basis for further, more extensive research.

Key words: *learning, education, educational psychology, school system.*

Introduction

Educational psychology is recognized by the American Psychological Association as a special branch of the field of study and practice of psychology, born as a need of the complex environments of children's education systems in educational institutions (American Psychological Association, 2014). The complex nature of humans in all its dimensions brings its own peculiarities also in the learning process, promoting the need for more in-depth studies, comprehensive and efficient practices in dealing with the teaching and learning process.

Education itself is defined in the psychological dictionary as: the process of teaching or acquiring knowledge, skills, and values (American Psychological Association, 2018). The process of education is important in the development and life cycle of the individual, showing its impact not only in the professional sphere, but also in the personal, social, etc. The importance of education is emphasized more in childhood due to the need and age appropriateness to generate, learn, and improve valuable skills, knowledge, and characteristics for all subsequent life cycles (University of the People, 2025).

Education can be considered as an added value for a number of reasons that are generally related to a more advanced formation of individuals and increased well-being in their lives (Abulencia, 2023). However, it is specifically worth mentioning as a value offered through education, the development of critical thinking, which is an asset of essential importance for reflection in the personal spectrum, interaction, and decision-making. It can be said that a more logically developed critical thinking can lead to healthier choices or provide more well-being throughout life (Abulencia, 2023).

Education helps improve communication skills by increasing opportunities to express oneself and understand others at a more advanced level (Abulencia, 2023). It has also been observed that education helps improve self-confidence in individuals (New Horizon Educational Institution, n.d.) A process that positively affects the well-being of individuals, such as education in this case, also brings benefits to society as a whole, mentioning here as an added value of education: reducing the level of crime, inspiring a more positive approach and mindset, improving mental health and promoting better choices for the health of individuals (New Horizon Educational Institution, n.d.).

Educational psychology considers studying and helping to apply scientific practices to improve the education system in close collaboration with all its stakeholders, so that the positive results that this process brings are assured and unharmed by intervening factors that can interfere and bring unexpected consequences with negative effects on individuals. The main mental processes that are considered from a psychological perspective during education are memory, attention, language processing, executive functions, reasoning, and problem solving (Babker, 2023). Educational or school psychologists should also considerate the social factors, the child's interpersonal relationships, starting from the close circle, the family and continuing with the community, school, peers, etc. (Abuswer, Brown, & Barker, 2023). The child's individuality is also respected and considered, including personality, temperament, forms of self-management of emotions, etc. (Nave, Edmonds, Hampson, Murzyn, & Sauerberger, 2016).

The work of the educational psychologist has been studied over the years and has based its practice on different schools of thought in psychology. The training of the educational psychologist to treat different cases in the school context can be varied by choosing different theories and therapies for the interpretation and treatment of cases. From the research conducted, it results that among the most efficient practices still remain the classical schools of psychology such as behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, etc. (Cherry, Learning Theories In Psychology, 2024). Meanwhile, widely accepted as theories and techniques that have positive results are mentioned experientialism, social learning theory, etc. (Cherry, Learning Theories In Psychology, 2024). Also, from the studies of recent years and innovative approaches in the treatment of educational systems through the psychological approach, elements such as promoting psychological well-being, extracurricular learning, incorporating the perspective of neuroscience in the treatment of children and the reorganization of school systems result in importance to be taken into consideration.

Overview of core theories and techniques

Behaviourism

Among the theories that help explain the process of learning and education as well as effective practices to address these issues is behaviorism. Behaviorism is known as a psychological approach founded by Watson in 1913 and that bases its practice on the study of objective and observable facts instead of subjective and qualitative processes, such as feelings, motives and consciousness (American Psychological Association, 2018). Behaviorism can be summarized in the idea that behavior is shaped based on environmental stimuli and the consequences

they bring (NU Editorial, 2023). Thus, taking into account the learning process, behaviorism defines learning as a continuous change in behavior, which occurs in response to environmental stimuli (Albatroso, 2025). In general terms, the study of the learning process from the point of view of this school of thought is related to the way in which certain behaviors of the child are conditioned in order to achieve desired results.

The basic concepts of behaviorism that are important in explaining and treating the learning process are conditioning, reinforcement, and associations. Conditioning is presented in two forms: classical conditioning and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning is defined as: a type of learning in which an initially neutral stimulus—the conditioned stimulus (CS)—when paired with a stimulus that elicits a reflex response—the unconditioned stimulus (US)—results in a learned, or conditioned, response (CR) when the CS is presented (American Psychological Association, 2018)). Meanwhile, operant conditioning consists of positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement and means the process in which behavioral change (i.e., learning) occurs as a function of the consequences of behavior according to the APA dictionary (2018). In the techniques used as positive or negative reinforcement, it is required to make a connection between the stimulus and the consequences that the behavior performed as a result of the stimulus. If the behavior towards the stimulus is preferable then the consequences will be positive and the connection of these two factors ensures that the preferred behavior is repeated and the opposite when the connection between a non-preferred behavior and negative consequences ensures that this behavior is not repeated based on the behaviorist explanation.

Considering the above, it is understood that the behaviorist approach to dealing with dynamics within the classroom and the education system helps the process of education and learning by trying to condition students' behaviors that promote or hinder the learning process. Some of the methods used to manage behaviors within the classroom and to improve the teaching and learning process are explained below.

Positive reinforcement is one of the basic methods of this theory, which means increasing the probability of performing a certain behavior thanks to the presentation of a positive stimulus (American Psychological Association, 2018). In this case, the teacher offers stimulating rewards or incentives to children, including material things, but also verbal assessments or congratulations (NU Editorial, 2023). For example, a teacher may evaluate his students with a motivational sticker if they complete the tasks in the predetermined time, may choose to congratulate the children with words when completing the tasks correctly, etc. Important in this case can be considered the selection of responsible and healthy rewards for the child by the teacher as well as adapting the reward to the nature of the children so that it is motivating enough to be considered. Also, the reinforcement

should be oriented towards the actual behavior that is being praised and not towards the child himself and his general character (St Peter's Preparatory School, 2022). Some of the benefits of positive reinforcement are improving self-esteem and self-confidence, creating a positive environment and atmosphere for the learning process, avoiding unwanted and unproductive behaviors for the child (Cambrilearn, 2016). A study shows that positive reinforcement is effective in managing behaviors within the classroom, providing positive results both in academics and in student engagement throughout the learning process (Anwar, Sultan, & Ali, 2024).

Another behaviorist technique for education during the learning process is negative reinforcement. This type of reinforcement means: the removal, prevention, or postponement of an aversive stimulus as a consequence of a response, which, in turn, increases the probability of that response (American Psychological Association, 2018). In other words, negative reinforcement motivates the child by removing an unpleasant stimulus, unlike positive reinforcement that motivates the child by adding a pleasant stimulus. In negative reinforcement, if a preferred behavior is performed, the teacher can choose to remove an unpleasant stimulus from the child, such as reducing the hours of extra homework, which increases the likelihood of repeating this behavior. This technique has been shown to be effective in various studies by increasing students' compliance with various tasks and reducing problematic behaviors (Athens & Vollmer, 2010) as well as rapid changes in behavior by increasing the frequency of desired behaviors (Lerman & Iwata, 1996), and also has positive effects on reducing anxiety and stress in students (NU Editorial, 2023).

Punishment is another important technique in the behaviorist school for the treatment of education in the educational context. According to the American Psychological Association dictionary, punishment is defined as: the process in which the relationship, or contingency, between a response and some stimulus or circumstance results in the response becoming less probable (American Psychological Association, 2018) When using the punishment technique, the teacher chooses to punish students with stimuli that are not preferred to them as a result of the non-positive behaviors performed. This technique aims to reduce the frequency of the non-preferred behavior by confronting the student with the negative consequences that result from it. Some of the forms of punishment used may be the loss of certain privileges, reprimand, i.e., verbal punishment, etc. This method is effective in reducing unwanted behaviors (Başarı, Bulunç, Köprülü, & Besim, 2025); however, it is considered very delicate and requires great care in application, as it may have negative effects on students, such as reduced self-esteem, avoidant or aggressive behaviors, etc., in the case of inappropriate administration (NU Editorial, 2023).

In the behavioral theory, other techniques result that carry importance and are used in teaching practices; however, what was explained above occupies a considerable place both in scientific studies and in teaching practice. Addressing problems within the classroom with behavioral theory and techniques beyond the discussions that each of the theories may have had over the years has proven effective and has stood the time. These techniques are followed in the school context in different countries of the world, mentioning here also the most well-known education systems. For example, English schools that are ranked third for the education system in the world (U.S News), in their revolution of the teaching process, first embraced the models of this theory and continue to use them today (Department for Education, 2024).

Cognitivism

As one of the three main theories of educational psychology (Medical College of Wisconsin, 2022), Cognitivism is defined as: the branch of psychology that explores the operation of mental processes related to perceiving, attending, thinking, language, and memory, mainly through inferences from behavior (American Psychological Association, 2018). This approach to psychology gained momentum during the 1950s-1970s, taking a deeper interest in how the way we think affects the way we act (Jordan, 2024). Cognitive psychologists of that period believed and sought to prove that the only influence on human behavior was not external and measurable stimuli as behaviorists had proven until then, but also an internal tendency of the individual that was related to mental processes and the way the individual himself thought and interpreted. Some of the important processes that the cognitive school studies and considers in its practice are explained below.

Attention is one of the important processes in the cognitive sphere, defined as: a state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain aspects of the environment rather than on others and the central nervous system is in a state of readiness to respond to stimuli. Because it has been presumed that human beings do not have an infinite capacity to attend to everything—focusing on certain items at the expense of others—much of the research in this field has been devoted to discerning which factors influence attention and to understanding the neural mechanisms that are involved in the selective processing of information (American Psychological Association, 2018). Attention helps in processing the right information and engaging in activities that are valuable and important to the individual.

Choice-based behaviors and decision-based behaviors are considered throughout the cognitive study of behavior. Both are considered derivative behaviors of the thinking process. However, the difference between one and the other lies in the fact that choice-based behavior implies choosing between several

given options based on the judgment and personal preferences of the individual, while decision-based behavior is a more complex process that involves higher mental engagement to differentiate between choice options with a judgment of the individual's preferences, circumstances and goals, but also the generation of new, previously unrepresented options based on his mental capacity (Beresford & Sloper, 2008).

Memory is a complex process with considerable importance in the cognitive functioning of the individual. It is defined as the psychological processes of acquiring, storing, retaining, and later retrieving information and involves three major processes: encoding, storage, and retrieval (Cherry, 2024).

In the study of mental processes, Language acquisition--how we learn to read, write, and express ourselves is also considered important. This process helps the individual in his daily functioning, his academic progress, and his interpersonal relationships.

Information processing, which is a process that, according to the APA dictionary, involves the flow of information through the human nervous system, involves the operation of perceptual systems, memory stores, decision processes, and response mechanisms. Information processing psychology is the approach that concentrates on understanding these operations (American Psychological Association, 2018).

All the above-mentioned processes, which constitute the basis of cognitivist study and practices, have an essential importance not only in the daily functioning of the individual but also in the education and learning process, including the school context. These processes are thoroughly studied in educational psychology and are addressed in various forms through the methods of the cognitivist school to ensure positive results in the learning and education process. Cognitivism as a learning theory supports the idea of environments that promote thinking, reflection and problem-solving approaches, so that students achieve improvements and positive academic and behavioral results (Main, 2022). One of the most well-known cognitivist theories that, despite criticism, is still considered in today's practice, related to the learning process is that of Jean Piaget on the stages of intellectual development of the child.

According to Piaget, there are four stages that children go through during the early life cycle that explain their cognitive capacity to process information. The first stage spans the age range from 0 to 2 years and is known as the sensorimotor stage (Cherry, 2024). In this stage, it is explained that the child learns through sensory experience, considering here feeling and acting reflectively, that is, based on reflexes. The learning process at this stage is related to the understanding that the child is a being separate from the world and that things continue to exist even when he is not seeing them, and also explores the world through touching, tasting and experimenting with nearby objects.

The second stage spans the ages of 2 to 7 years and is known as the Preoperational stage of cognitive development (Cherry, 2024). The main characteristic of this stage is further mental development as well as the improvement of the speech and language process. Symbolic thinking and learning through role play also develop in this stage.

The third stage spans the ages of 7 to 11 years and is known as the operational stage of cognitive development (Cherry, 2024). In this stage, logical thinking and learning about emotional terms develop significantly, expressing interest in the state and emotions of others.

The fourth and final stage spans the ages of 11 and above and is known as the formal operational stage of cognitive development (Cherry, 2024). At this age, the child acquires the ability to think abstractly, while continuing to develop logical thinking. During this stage, the child has the capacity to learn about morality, social norms, and the general functioning of society, as well as to solve hypothetical problems.

Piaget's stages of intellectual development can help in the school context of education, because they provide a broad information base for understanding students' behaviors as a derivative of their intellectual development for their age, and addressing curricula adequately with the concepts that they can perceive, learn, and use at the stage of cognitive development in which they are.

Some of the cognitive methods that have proven effective in educating students and the learning process are: cognitive restructuring, meaningful learning, and information organization.

Cognitive restructuring is related to challenging cognitive distortions. By cognitive distortions, it is meant: faulty or inaccurate thinking, perception, or belief (American Psychological Association, 2018). Through this technique, various behavioral problems that stem from false perceptions or beliefs can be addressed, even in the school and educational context. Moving through the stages of this technique, from identifying problematic thinking to rationally challenging these thoughts, and to the final stage, which is achieving automatic opposition to cognitive distortions by the student, can reduce the likelihood of repeating behavior based on them (Madeson, 2023).

Meanwhile, meaningful learning is one of the cognitive methods that serves to attract students' attention and help them memorize information. By meaningful learning, it is understood that the learning of concepts by incorporating an element of students' personal interests into their explanation, making them create a kind of connection with new knowledge, and making it meaningful to them (Morales & Gray, 2023).

Information organization is of fundamental importance in the context of school learning. This technique helps in easier perception of information and easier memorization due to the clarity of explanation and logical schematization.

Techniques such as summarization or paraphrasing can often be used to have positive results in understanding and memorizing new information. In a study conducted on the graphic organization of information, it results that it has a positive effect on increasing the level of understanding as well as inferential and vocabulary knowledge (Dexter, Park, & Hughes, 2011).

The cognitive approach, beyond criticism, is appreciated for its positive contribution to the teaching, learning and education process in the school context due to the importance and emphasis on the impact of the thinking process on the behavior and academic achievements of students. In order for cognitive techniques to be as efficient as possible in their use in the context of educational institutions, the following should also be taken into consideration. In order for learning to be effective, teaching must be based on adapted and well-structured curricula, learning must be focused with clear and achievable objectives, the student must be considered as an active part of the process and be directly involved through analysis, questions, and discovery (Main, 2022). At the same time, it must be ensured that their attention is focused during the explanation process, that learning has a relevant purpose, that students are encouraged to achieve their goals, and that teaching is organized in such a way as to promote the discovery of ideas and support the student in implementing these new ideas (Albatrosov, 2025).

Constructivism

Considered one of the fundamental theories of educational psychology, Constructivism is defined as: the theoretical perspective that people actively build their perception of the world and interpret objects and events that surround them in terms of what they already know. Thus, their current state of knowledge guides processing, substantially influencing how (and what) new information is acquired (American Psychological Association, 2018). Constructivism emphasizes the importance of personal experiences throughout the learning process by highlighting the positive value of a learner-centered approach. This theory has its origins around the middle and end of the 20th century, having the foundations of its formation and development in Jean Piaget's theory of learning and intellectual development (Allen, 2022). Constructivist researchers believe that the learning process is greatly influenced by all the personal assets of the individual, their background and previous knowledge through which they shape and internalize new skills and knowledge. In the last three decades, this theory has had a significant impact on the design of teaching and learning (Allen, 2022).

Some of the important basic principles to consider from this theory, which explain and help in an effective learning and education process in the school system, are (WGU: The University of You, 2020):

Learning is an active process – This principle seeks to emphasize the importance of active participation in the learning process. The student is at the center and always at the attention of the process by becoming part of the learning, not simply as an external observer and listener, as has happened in classical learning methods. Educational environments with direct questions, discussion-based explanation, exploration of students' knowledge and ideas about topics before full information is provided by the teacher can be mentioned as forms of learning in an active, inclusive, and constructivist process.

Knowledge is constructed - It means that learning is a constructive process where the student, based on his/her own knowledge, experiences, ideas, or beliefs, builds and constructs new knowledge. The information received at school in this case is not incorporated in a template way into the student; it is adapted, understood, and interpreted based on what the student currently has in his/her own mind. This is known as the basic principle of constructivism, because it explains and is based on the essence of this theory: learning based on and centered on the individual and his/her experiences and knowledge.

Learning is contextual - Learning is a contextual process explains the idea that people connect the knowledge and things we learn with the context in which they are. This means that students find meaning in information that is related to their personal experiences and have a tendency to remember longer that information with which they find a common point.

Knowledge is personal – Also related to the principle mentioned above, it can be concluded that learning is a personal process because it is based on the experiences, ideas, or beliefs of the individual themselves. Some students may hear the same information explained or be taught the same skill, but they will remember different things, interpret different concepts from them, and put into use different elements learned according to their personal needs and beliefs.

Learning is a social activity – Learning, especially in the school context, occurs within a social environment and cannot be considered only as an isolated process of the individual. Practice has shown that the acquisition of knowledge and skills has positive results when it occurs in the presence of peers and when it is carried out in cooperation with them within an interactive process. Group work, joint extracurricular activities, peer help, and explanation can be considered as forms of constructivist learning in educational systems that are related to and represent this very principle.

Learning exists in the mind- This principle emphasizes the importance of involving mental processes in the acquisition of new knowledge and the learning process itself. Experience and concretization of knowledge are quite effective in learning, but a process considered equally important is thinking about what is being learned, or, as it can be said differently, mental experience. Logic,

imagination, connecting previous information that have been memorized with current information, and general analysis to reach conclusions can be considered as practices of this principle.

People learn to learn, as they learn- The learning process occurs in several dimensions simultaneously and not in separate directions. A given task or learning information includes and engages several concepts simultaneously, which are learned and improved by students at the same time in a passive or active way. For example, if a student is asked to write an essay on the history of music, at the same time, he learns new knowledge about music, but also learns the format of writing an essay, learns new words, or other things that can be applied in this case.

Motivation is key to learning- Motivation is considered an essential element for the learning process, taking into account the effect it has on mental processes such as attention, memory or engagement. According to the constructivist explanation, without motivation it would be difficult to create a connection between previous experiences to find the connection with them, to understand and assimilate new information.

Some of the techniques of this theory that can be used by teachers in the classroom for an efficient teaching and learning process are: activating prior knowledge, asking real-world questions, providing strategic scaffolding, creating Interactive, Exploratory Environments, and assessing focused on logic and understanding (McLeod, Constructivism Learning Theory & Philosophy of Education, 2025). Activating prior knowledge can be accomplished through questions by checking the knowledge that students currently have to create space for new knowledge and to make it easier to connect new information with the current one in order to facilitate the process of acquisition and understanding. Asking real-world questions helps to stimulate curiosity and concretize concepts to make the process of acquisition as easy as possible. Also, if students are given the opportunity to initially conceptualize and understand the information from the question itself without explanation, it can result in more effective solutions that will be remembered longer. Exploratory environments motivate effective learning by aiding the process of understanding through sharing experiences, exposure to different perspectives, and discussions to reach logical and valid conclusions. Meanwhile, teacher assessment, based on the constructivist learning method, is important to focus on logical achievements, the ability to understand, assimilate, and explain information, and not just the ability to memorize and reproduce it. This assessment method emphasizes the importance and promotes positive results in the use of higher cognitive functions in the learning process.

Like other theories, constructivist theory has been criticized throughout its history of creation and consolidation, but it continues to be used and is considered one of the most important and significant theories in educational psychology, and it can be said that its use has increased in recent years. It is important to take

into consideration the administration of constructivist methodology in education by teachers, as it is also mentioned in studies conducted in Albania, this theory can generate positive results when applied in teaching, but the difficulty of this method retains in the lack of school staff trained to implement it in education (Nela, 2017). Two of the most popular approaches used in educational institutions today, Montessori and Reggio Emilia, are both constructivist theories centered on the learner (Montessori Kids Univers).

Theory of social learning

Social learning theory was developed in the late 1970s by Albert Bandura, inspired and based on his famous experiment with the Bobo doll (Alvarez, 2020). Social learning is defined by the APA dictionary as: the general view that learning is largely or wholly due to modeling, imitation, and other social interactions. More specifically, behavior is assumed to be developed and regulated by external stimulus events, such as the influence of other individuals, and by external reinforcement, such as praise, blame, and reward (American Psychological Association, 2018). So, at the heart of social learning theory is the idea that behavior is shaped and influenced by the influence of environment in which a child grows up and spends a significant part of their time. In this context, the behavior of students in school can be explained as a result of the behaviors they have learned from the environment in which they grew up, as well as the punishment or reinforcement of certain behaviors.

According to Bandura, there are four essential stages to achieve success in the learning process: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Cherry, 2024). In the first stage, the essential element is attention. According to Bandura, the first step in learning something is to pay attention to the model so that we can understand it. Lack of attention or distraction reduces the possibility of learning and positive results. Meanwhile, the second step in the learning process is to retain the information received. Without having the capacity to memorize information, the learning process becomes difficult. Also, not successfully passing this stage negatively affects the process of recalling previous information to shape the learned behavior at another time when the individual must act according to what he has learned. Reproduction is the third phase, where, after attention has been paid to the model and it has been stored as information, the individual reproduces the behavior in a certain context. Important in this case is repetition and practice to acquire the behavior. Finally, there is motivation, which emphasizes the importance of motivation to perform or not the behaviors observed in the model. This means that people are more likely to reproduce a behavior from an observed model if the latter has been positively rewarded.

Social learning theory finds its place and can also be applied in the classroom context through techniques such as the flipped classroom model, gamification and simulations, peer coaching, etc. (Alvarez, 2020).

The flipped classroom technique presents an innovative learning model, challenging the classic method of the teacher explaining in class and giving homework. While using this technique, students watch explanatory videos and read information at home, while in class they carry out practical activities and learn concretely about what they have studied. This method is related to social learning since students practice with their peers and learn by observing each other's successes and failures during the completion of various tasks. The teacher's role in this case is that of a facilitator and guide, abandoning the classic theories that the teacher owns the information. The teacher can also help the social learning process by motivating preferred behaviors in the classroom so that students observe positive behaviors and are motivated to reproduce them.

Meanwhile, gamification and stimulation is a very motivating techniques for the learning process within the classroom. In this case, the tasks and activities of the students are turned by the teacher into a stimulating game. The idea of turning tasks into a game increases the interest of the students and encourages their motivation to pay attention. Games are often associated with fun and enjoyment. Emotions that students can experience during gamification can make the knowledge obtained through the game be remembered longer, also due to the connection that can be created with the emotional stimuli, sensations, and memories created. Throughout the game, students continue to learn through observing each other and motivation through the rewards that those who win the game receive.

Peer coaching is related to the process of learning from peers. Students can help each other to complete certain tasks. In this case, to have positive results, it is important to have the right fit between students, as for some children, this technique can be disturbing and have negative effects. The selection must be made carefully so that the student helping the peer and the student being helped have a positive approach to this method and feel good about each other, accept the help, and learn more during the process.

The theory of social learning finds a place in educational institutions, beyond the criticisms it may have encountered, as it has positive results in the process of educating children in the school context. Some of the positive effects of using social learning techniques in the classroom, based on scientific studies, are: increased self-efficacy, increased sense of belonging, improved achievements, increased motivation through perceived similarity and attainability (McLeod, 2025).

Other theories and current studies

Experientialism

Experientialism is another theory that offers effective methods to help the learning process in the school context. This theory focuses on the idea that the learning process is quite dynamic, requiring active participation of students and learning through experience. It presents a holistic approach that emphasizes how experiences, including environmental factors, cognition and emotional factors, influence the learning process (Cherry, 2025).

According to this theory, there are four types of learning: converger, diverger, assimilator, and accommodator, which can be taken into account by teachers to address the teaching process in a more personalized and effective way and to facilitate and make the learning process as efficient as possible. The converger learning type includes those students who prefer practical and technical tasks rather than interaction with other people, and are also capable in the field of thinking and can provide solutions to problems and concretize them in a practical way.

Meanwhile, the divergent learning type prefers the processes of seeing and feeling; consequently, they have more results and are more motivated to complete tasks that require mental solutions by putting into work processes such as imagination, as well as group tasks and interacting with other people. Meanwhile, the assimilator type is closely related to the processes of seeing and thinking, therefore it is more effective in logical explanations, processing and organizing information, and concise ideas. Also, for them, social interaction for learning is not very preferred. And finally, the accommodator is related to concepts such as doing and feeling, having a more practical and intuitive approach. For them, logical analyses are not very preferred and generally tend to be based on the analyses of others; however, they like to learn from new experiences.

Experiential learning can be achieved by working on real-world problems through project-based learning, immersive activities, training, workshops, etc., where more than just the thinking process is required. This technique has effectiveness and positive results by enhancing problem-solving skills, improving retention, strengthening collaboration, direct application to professional roles, and increasing motivation and engagement (Alexander, 2025).

Humanism

Another theory that can explain and provide effective methods for managing the learning process is the humanist one. By humanism in psychology is meant any perspective that seeks to uphold human values and to resist the reduction of human beings and behaviors to merely natural objects and events. In this spirit, humanistic psychologies have resisted not only natural scientific psychology but also theories that emphasize the negative and pathological aspects of human nature (American Psychological Association, 2018). In the school context, the humanist theory presents the approach that at the center of the learning system and process is the student, who has the capacity to improve behavior if the needs important for his or her well-being are met. These needs and this concept are based on the work and ideas of Rogers and Maslow, with his hierarchy of needs.

The main principles of applying this theory to have positive learning results are:

- Learners can be trusted to find their own goals and should choose what they learn at school (and beyond).
- Learners should set their standards and evaluate their work and progress themselves.
- Learning experiences should help learners to develop positive relationships with their peers. (Cloke, 2025)

Beyond criticism, based on studies, the techniques of humanistic theory in the learning process are effective in several directions, such as: the emotional well-being of students, feeling safe and motivated, promoting a sense of responsibility, feeling accepted and respected, encouraging further exploration of oneself, increasing awareness and academic success (Salhi).

Current studies

The field of educational psychology continues to be a discipline in study, for which ongoing scientific research is carried out. Over the past few years, some important findings in this context, to be considered by facilitators of the learning process in schools, are explained below.

Recent findings and research have largely emphasized the need to consider the well-being and psychological aspects of students in schools. Going beyond the classical framework of the school institution, it is important to pay attention to the psychological well-being of students in these environments. According to a study, it also results that psychological well-being is positively related to school achievement (Raccanello, Vicentini, Trifiletti, & Burro, 2020).

Another element of innovative educational psychology is the inclusion of technology in the educational process, due to the wide range of opportunities it offers to support the teaching and learning process (Bouchrika, 2025).

In other studies, the involvement of students in extracurricular projects and learning through them is considered very important for today's classrooms. Here, the studies mention elements such as observation, creation of educational games, development of conceptual maps, analysis of audiovisual and artistic materials, narrative creation, and discussion of cases (Schneider, Stumm, Da Rocha, & Levandowski, 2023).

Recently, the inclusion of neuroscience findings in the facilitation of learning processes has also been considered of great importance. According to studies, the neuroscience perspective can offer teachers more effective methods in the process of explanation as well as fruitful practices to explain to students how they can better understand their learning process while also having a positive impact on their well-being (Simion, 2023).

Adapting teaching by making it inclusive to support diverse learners is another important element of innovation in the field of educational psychology. Students with a different cultural, cognitive, or linguistic background can benefit from the preparation of teachers to create inclusive environments, where the teachers should be well informed about the principles of memory, motivation, and social learning (Bouchrika, 2025).

Results

At the end of the above research, it can be concluded that educational psychology is a discipline of fundamental importance in ensuring a successful learning and educational process for children in schools. This discipline is described by various theories formulated and tested over the years, among which can be mentioned as fundamental, current, and effective the behaviorist theory, cognitivism, constructivism, social learning experientialism, and humanistic learning theory. Behaviorist theory has at its center the perspective that behavior is the result of external stimuli and their consequences. Some of the techniques of this theory also find their place in today's practice of the learning and education process in schools, resulting in higher academic achievement, increased frequency of desired behaviors, and higher management of the classroom and the teaching process. Such can be mentioned as positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment, etc. The cognitive theory bases behavior on the mental processes and internal dispositions of the individual: on the thoughts, beliefs, or interpretations that he makes of the world. In educational psychology, this approach finds its place in the practice of educational institutions through practices such as cognitive

restructuring, meaningful learning, and information organization, giving positive results in changing behaviors or improving academic results.

Constructivist theory emphasizes the importance of students' personal experiences and sees learning as a special process for each student. At the center of this approach is the student himself, who must be encouraged to participate in the learning process and acquire it, while the teacher has a facilitating and guiding role. Valuable techniques of this theory that find their place in school practice by generating positive results for education and learning are the activation of prior knowledge, asking real-world questions, providing strategic scaffolding, creating interactive exploratory environments, and assessing focused on logic and understanding.

Social learning theory is based on the idea that the learning process occurs through observation and motivation or punishment of these observed behaviors. A good part of students' behaviors is a result of the social environment in which they have grown up. Effective techniques in teaching and learning of this theory are: the flipped classroom model, gamification, and simulations, peer coaching.

Experiential theory is defined by the idea that learning is a process that occurs through experience. Some of the techniques used in educational systems from this theory are project-based learning, comprehensive activities, training, workshops, etc. This technique has effectiveness and positive results in enhancing problem-solving skills, improving retention, stronger collaboration, direct application to professional roles, and increasing motivation and engagement.

Humanistic theory places the student at the center and holds that a successful education and learning process results from meeting the needs and fulfilling the necessary conditions for the well-being of students. The positive effects of practicing this theory on the education and learning process in schools are: students' emotional well-being, feeling safe and motivated, fostering a sense of responsibility, feeling accepted and respected, fostering further self-exploration, increasing awareness, and academic success.

Innovative findings in the field of educational psychology strongly recommend incorporating elements such as technology into the education and learning process in schools, engaging students in extracurricular projects, ensuring the psychological well-being of students, considering comprehensive methods to leave no one behind, and incorporating the perspective of neuroscience.

Discussion

Beyond the studied effectiveness of the theories and techniques themselves, it is also very important to properly train teachers to put these techniques into practice. None of the above-mentioned theories is completely accepted without

criticism; therefore, care must be taken in addressing and properly practicing them to achieve the positive results they can offer. In today's school context and the diversity of students, needs, and the process of education, teaching, and learning itself, a single theory cannot cover and provide success for the entire process. Proper integration of techniques from the above-mentioned theories would provide appropriate environments to provide successful education and learning for a wider range of problems and students. Each of the techniques must be adapted to the characteristics of the case and the characteristics of the student, as well as to the teacher's ability to administer them. Success in this process requires rigorous professional training, insight, intuition, analysis, and continuous work to select and integrate techniques that are effective in a given classroom.

The role of the school psychologist in this process must also be taken into account, who can design curricula, train teachers and students, facilitate the process at any point where the need for external assistance arises, and support both students and teachers individually when the need arises.

Recommendations

It is recommended to consider a broader literature base to ensure an even deeper and more detailed review of this topic. Also, conducting independent, expanded studies for each of the theories would generate a more in-depth analysis. Further statistical studies to concretely measure the effectiveness of these theories and techniques in the context of today's practices are seen as a necessary step in future research. Also, more in-depth studies of intervening variables in the effectiveness of these methods, such as adequate teacher training, teaching curricula, etc., could generate valuable results. It is also recommended to conduct independent studies on this topic for the Albanian context.

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Techniques and Strategies of Classroom Management for the Inclusion of Students with Diverse Abilities in the Learning Process _____

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Abstract

Teaching is an organized, systematic, creative, and interactive process that takes place within an institutional context with the goal of enabling students to acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies. A key aspect of this process is the quality of the teacher–student relationship, which directly influences effective classroom management. Well-structured classroom management, particularly within a safe and stable environment, fosters positive academic outcomes and supports students’

social and emotional development. In today's increasingly diverse classrooms—where students come from various social and cultural backgrounds—teachers face numerous challenges related to behaviour, social interaction, and the active engagement of all learners, including those with disabilities.

This paper focuses on analysing the challenges faced by students with disabilities during the learning process and identifies effective techniques and strategies that teachers can apply to ensure an inclusive classroom environment. Drawing from contemporary literature and practical experiences, the aim of this paper is to provide a structured approach to classroom management with a focus on inclusion.

In conclusion, the paper offers recommendations on the importance of early identification of students with disabilities, professional development for teaching staff, and the involvement of multidisciplinary teams in the educational process.

Keywords: *disabilities, inclusion, classroom management, teaching, pedagogical strategies*

Introduction

Special education is a field dedicated to supporting students with diverse disabilities, special needs, or learning difficulties through personalized services and support (Cerna, McKie, & Sandoval-Lucero, 2021). Its primary goal is to ensure that these students gain access to the curriculum, participate in classroom activities, and reach their full academic, social, and emotional potential (Larosa, Zebua, Zebua, & Heryanto, 2022). Inclusion in education reflects the principle that every learner should be engaged in effective learning, regardless of individual differences. Learning and skill development vary among students, both in manner and pace.

Teaching is widely recognized as a significant social aspect of education. Woolfolk (2011) defines teaching as an organized process aimed at educating and shaping students. This process is complex, involving relationships and interactions that require continuous coordination and balance. Educational activity primarily occurs in institutions such as schools, academies, colleges, and universities and is oriented toward the overall development of learners (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974).

Modern classrooms are increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. Since 2003, nearly half of students with different abilities have learned alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms, making teaching a challenging process that demands appropriate inclusive strategies. In this context, educational quality is closely tied to contemporary teaching methods and techniques. Effective classroom management depends on consistency, as teachers must follow through on what they say and enforce the rules they establish (Wong & Wong, 2014).

Integrating Students with Diverse Abilities in Classroom Management

A significant challenge for schools is integrating students with diverse abilities into the teaching process. Inclusion is essential for fostering an inclusive educational environment, where diversity is welcomed, and measures are taken to ensure equitable learning opportunities. An inclusive school does not aim to erase individual differences but rather implements the right to quality education for all students.

In an inclusive classroom, teachers adapt lessons to address the needs of each student, offering personalized support (Evans, Carnahan, & McKenzie, 2021). Schools organize structures and policies to ensure that all students can benefit from full participation in school life. Effective inclusion requires collaboration among the principal, school board, teaching staff, and support staff. Planning for inclusion should be reflected in annual and medium-term school plans. However, challenges such as curriculum overload, class organization, teaching schedules, national exams, and other priorities can hinder planning and collaboration (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1992).

Integrating students with diverse abilities also involves adapting physical environments to minimize barriers. Kindergarten and school buildings should follow Universal Design principles, which aim to create spaces usable by all without specialized modifications. These principles are endorsed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Gersten, Baker, & Smith, 2001). Moreover, a structured environment that fosters student responsibility contributes to a motivating and supportive learning atmosphere (Polirstok, 2025).

The success of inclusive education depends on institutional changes and the use of diverse teaching methods. Inclusive classrooms provide structure, organization, and materials that facilitate access for all learners. Students with special needs exhibit diverse behaviors, interests, and learning attitudes; therefore, teaching strategies must be carefully planned, managed, and continuously evaluated.

Providing students with opportunities to participate in classroom activities is crucial, as inadequate planning may lead to frustration and disengagement (Lerner, 1989). Effective strategies include clearly outlining learning objectives and ensuring that content aligns with students' abilities. Creating a positive and inclusive environment fosters belonging and confidence. Research shows that inclusive classrooms improve academic outcomes for students with disabilities by 23% compared to segregated settings (Wybrix, 2025). Teachers can promote inclusivity through teamwork, positive interactions, and barrier-free participation.

Multisensory learning techniques enhance comprehension and retention for students with special needs. Using visual aids, auditory resources, and tactile activities makes learning more engaging (21K School, 2025).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an effective approach for inclusive classroom management. UDL provides all students, including those with diverse abilities and learning styles, equal opportunities to learn by designing flexible and accessible curricula (Priyadharsini & Sahaya Mary, 2024). UDL promotes equity by ensuring access to educational resources and fosters an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The Importance of Teaching Techniques in Managing Inclusive Classrooms

The success of schools in providing inclusive education for students with diverse abilities significantly depends on the adaptations made throughout the school and the teaching techniques employed by educators. An inclusive classroom is characterized by structure and organization, where necessary equipment and materials allow easy access for all students. Students with diverse abilities exhibit different behaviors, interests, and attitudes toward learning, similar to other groups of students. Therefore, instructional strategies and teaching methods must be carefully planned, managed, and continuously evaluated (Lerner, 1989).

Providing students the opportunity to actively participate and enjoy classroom and extracurricular activities is essential. Poorly planned instructional tasks may lead to frustration and disengagement from learning. Creating a positive and supportive learning environment, where students feel valued and respected, is equally important. Teachers can achieve this through behavior management techniques, such as positive reinforcement and clear behavioral expectations. Positive reinforcement involves using praise and rewards to encourage desirable behaviors, while clear expectations help students understand what is expected of them in the classroom.

Inclusive teaching also requires utilizing all learning channels, including visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities. Teachers should ensure that instructional materials, including hands-on resources, are adapted and aligned with students' chronological age, interests, and abilities. This approach maximizes inclusion and supports learning for all students.

In this context, Song, Lee, Seo, Paik, and Do (2018) highlight that positive individual behavior support effectively reduces off-task behaviors and increases compliance among students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive elementary schools. This demonstrates that individualized behavioral support is a highly effective intervention in inclusive settings. By integrating diverse teaching

techniques and fostering a supportive learning environment, educators can address the individual needs of students and enhance the learning experience for all.

Teachers play a pivotal role in addressing classroom challenges and adapting instructional tasks to ensure the inclusion of all students in the learning process (Nano & Nano, 2021). They are essential in implementing inclusive classroom management practices and creating structured, organized learning environments by establishing clear standards and protocols. This approach maximizes instructional time and minimizes disruptions, fostering a calm and productive setting for students (Iqbal et al., 2021; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020).

Despite these challenges, teachers can design dynamic and engaging lessons not only for typically developing students but also for those with special needs. Effective teaching requires coordinating group activities, collaborating with colleagues, and maintaining continuous communication with students (Best, 2020). According to Crum (n.d.), instructors can enhance learning for students with special needs through various strategies, primarily focused on communication.

Furthermore, the integration of assistive technologies can provide significant support. Tools such as text-to-speech software assist students with reading difficulties, while speech-to-text tools support those with writing challenges. By accommodating individual needs, these technologies enable students to participate fully in the learning process, promoting equitable learning opportunities for all (Mind, 2025).

Conclusions

In conclusion, teachers play a pivotal role in creating and managing inclusive classrooms by addressing challenges, adapting tasks, and fostering a supportive learning environment for all students. Through the implementation of effective behavior management techniques, such as positive reinforcement and clear expectations, they contribute to the development of a calm and productive classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, teachers must leverage all learning channels and adapt instructional materials to meet the individual needs of students, ensuring full and equitable participation in the learning process. In doing so, teachers not only support the academic development of students but also contribute to the creation of a school environment where every student feels valued and respected.

Additionally, it is crucial for teachers to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to implement various strategies that support inclusive education. This includes the use of assistive technologies, development of behavior management skills, and creation of a culture of respect and collaboration within the classroom. Moreover, teachers need to have a deep understanding of cultural

diversity and utilize instructional materials that reflect this diversity, thereby contributing to a richer and more inclusive learning environment.

Ultimately, the implementation of inclusive classroom management practices requires a continuous commitment and a coordinated approach from teachers, schools, and the community. Through ongoing training, collaboration, and the use of tailored resources, an educational environment can be created where every student can reach their full potential. So, promoting accelerated learning for all students, especially those with diverse abilities and needs, is essential for fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment. Such efforts not only enhance the development of individual learners but also support the growth of a more diverse, skilled, and adaptable society. Investing in inclusive education is an investment in the future, yielding broad and lasting positive impacts.”

Recommendations

- 1. Identify students with diverse abilities and integrate them into the educational system:** It is crucial to identify students with diverse abilities early in their educational journey and create opportunities for their full integration into the educational system. This involves adapting teaching methods and providing necessary support to ensure equal participation.
- 2. Ensure equal opportunities for all students’ groups:** Establish conditions that enable the active participation of all students, including those with special needs, by providing access to learning materials, activities, and support tailored to their individual needs.
- 3. Utilize specific strategies for students with special needs:** Identify and implement teaching strategies that address the specific needs of students with special needs, such as using assistive technology, adapting materials, and employing teaching methods that promote their inclusion.
- 4. Organize multidisciplinary teams and implement practical measures:** Form multidisciplinary teams comprising teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, and other specialists to develop and implement individualized plans for students with special needs, ensuring coordinated and effective support.
- 5. Focus on Discovering and Implementing Contemporary Strategies Successfully:** Encourage educators to explore and implement contemporary teaching strategies, such as active learning methods, differentiated instruction, and the integration of technology in the learning process, to enhance student engagement and success.

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The Approach of Support Teachers Towards Children with Autism in Inclusive Education in Albania

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Abstract

This baseline study explores the approach and experiences of shadow teachers in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive education in Albania. Using a mixed methods methodology, the study relies on the analysis of a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire completed by 281 support teachers nationwide and on thematic analysis of five semi-structured interviews, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). According to the survey's findings, 84.3% of respondents had prior experience dealing with children with autism but only 48.4% have received specialized training. About 92.2% of participants indicated that they would prefer further training in topics like behaviour management, communication, and useful techniques like Applied Behaviour Analysis, (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). Furthermore, 89.7% consider the role of the support teacher as crucial for the effective inclusion of children with autism (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). However, UNESCO (2020) reports that the most frequently cited problems include classroom overload, a lack of resources, a lack of institutional coordination, and inadequate training. From the thematic analysis of the made interviews, five main ones were selected: (1) the responsibilities of the support teacher, (2) collaboration and cooperation, (3) the impact on student inclusion, (4) professional development and training, (5) issues and deficiencies of the system (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition to highlighting the need for ongoing institutional support and the ambiguity

of their responsibilities, participants saw their work as essential to providing academic and emotional support to students with autism (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). This study highlights the importance of an integrated and well-supported approach to strengthening the role of support teachers in inclusive education in Albania. The findings suggest the need for sustained policy interventions, including regular training programs and the improvement of collaborative structures among actors involved in the education of children with autism (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Loreman, 2007).

Keywords: *support teachers, autism, inclusive education, Albania, professional training, thematic analysis.*

Introduction

For education systems around the world, including children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in public school poses both a difficulty and an opportunity (UNESCO, 2020). Children with disabilities are increasingly attending public schools in Albania as a result of inclusive education initiatives (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2023). Within this context, the role of the teaching assistant—often referred to as the “support teacher”—has become essential for providing direct and continuous assistance to children with ASD (Giangreco et al., 2010). This baseline study explores the approaches, perceptions, and challenges of teaching assistants working in inclusive educational settings across Albania. In order to create meaningful learning experiences, teaching assistants collaborate closely with classroom teachers and families to support children’s academic and social development, and encourage active involvement in class (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). However, study and documentation regarding their position, the difficulties they encounter, and the institutional assistance they receive are still severely lacking in Albania (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). By investigating the firsthand experiences of teaching assistants working with autistic children in Albanian public schools, this study seeks to close that gap. This study analyses current practices, training and resource needs, and suggestions for improving inclusive education policy by integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews and a comprehensive online survey (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Loreman, 2007).

At a time when effective inclusion requires coordination among various educational actors, the proper approach of teaching assistants is an important step toward a more inclusive, empathetic, and equitable education system for all children (UNESCO, 2020).

Literature Review

Studies and research conducted on the work of support teachers (assistant) in inclusive education for children with autism have been conducted in many countries and have provided different results regarding the impact of support, the methods used and the benefits for children. Most studies have focused on improving academic performance, social integration, and the development of behavioral skills for children with autism.

According to the study by Pijl, Frissen and colleagues (2015), 62% of teachers reported that the support of support teachers had a direct impact on the academic performance of children with autism. Meanwhile, 58% of the support teachers used adapted teaching strategies, including the use of visual materials and assistive technology. Only 45% of teachers in common classes reported a positive impact on social integration from the help of support teachers.

Odom and Wolery (2017) found that 72% of interventions led by aide teachers were effective in improving behavior and engagement in learning activities. Structuring instruction and using visual techniques were rated as 80% more effective in improving academic performance. Social and academic performance improved by 60% as a result of behaviour control strategies like rewards and assistance in dealing with recurrent behaviours.

In a longitudinal study conducted by Nilsen and Langer (2020), over a 5-year period, 68% of children who received support from aide teachers in inclusive classrooms showed significant improvement in social and academic skills. Compared to children who did not get direct support, those who did had a 47% higher chance of finishing academic assignments.

According to Smith and Lamb (2022), 83% of educators who believed that children with autism could be successfully taught employed more structured and individualised methods. 55% of support teachers reported direct contribution to improving children's engagement in academic and social activities, while 40% of children showed increases in positive behavior and teamwork skills.

Grant and Montgomery (2019) found that 60% of children with autism who had regular help from support teachers showed improvements in communication and collaboration skills. 65% of them reported that techniques like visual aids and step-by-step instruction improved their ability to participate in group activities and hone their social skills.

According to Ryan and Sampson (2016), 75% of parents and teachers who took part in this interview reported improvements in the inclusion and social skill development of children with autism, underscoring the significance of parent-teacher collaboration. 78% of children who received structured support from this collaboration showed academic and social improvements.

According to Sutherland and Cihak (2019), 68% of kids who received constructive behavioural help behaved in a more appropriate and reliable manner. 72% of kids reported improved social and academic engagement as a result of using rewards and behaviour management techniques.

Finally, Pijl and Frissen (2018) showed that 77% of teachers in inclusive classrooms reported greater commitment and confidence to work with children with autism after special training. 53% of teaching assistants reported that inclusive support helped them better manage challenging situations and improve children's development.

These studies, conducted in different places and times, highlight the importance of supporting teaching assistants in improving the academic performance, behavior, and social integration of children with autism in inclusive classrooms. Studies confirm that:

- Individual and regular support from support teachers is essential for the development of children with autism.
- Teacher training and the use of adapted methods (such as visual strategies, step-by-step learning and behavior management) are crucial for the success of inclusive practices.

The number of support teachers in Albania has increased significantly, from 0 in 2013 to around 2,100 in 2024–2025, according to the Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 511/28.07.2022 (Republic of Albania, Council of Ministers, 2022).

Methodology

In order to give a thorough and in-depth account of the experiences, viewpoints, and difficulties faced by assistant teachers in inclusive education for children with autism in Albania, this study used a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques. While the qualitative technique seeks to emphasise individual themes and experiences, the quantitative approach seeks to quantify and analyse participants' attitudes and perspectives.

Sample

The study involved 281 teaching assistants employed in preschool, primary and secondary education across Albania. Participants were chosen via a convenience sampling method. This group represents a significant sample of teaching assistants working with children with special needs, including those with autism.

Instruments

Quantitative questionnaire: A Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was created, which included questions focused on:

- Understanding autism in inclusive education
- Understanding social skills of children with autism in inclusive education
- Challenges shadow teachers face in inclusive education
- Professional Development and Training needs

Qualitative interviews: Extensive interviews were conducted with a small group of 15 teaching assistants, who were voluntarily and representatively selected from several different districts. To highlight teaching assistants' experiences, difficulties, and best practices, the interviews were designed using open-ended questions.

Data Collection

We shared the questionnaires in a couple of ways—some were handed out in person, while others were sent out online. For the interviews, which lasted about 30 to 45 minutes, we made sure to get the participants' consent before recording them.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data processing and aggregation

Since the original individual data were not available in the full Google Forms format, the statistical analysis of this study was based on the final summarized data, which were exported and manually transcribed into a text document (Word). These data contained the final percentages of participants' responses to each question of the questionnaire, which now represent a preliminary aggregation performed automatically by the Google Forms platform.

At this stage, the data were reorganized and systematized in summary tables according to research themes, being divided into response categories (e.g. "Strongly agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree"). This process aimed to visually and analytically present the results in a clear and understandable way.

Descriptive processing of the data, which examined the broad patterns of participants' attitudes and perceptions for every theme, was part of the further analysis. By identifying places where there was a greater degree of agreement or disagreement, this technique allowed the researcher to make consistent inferences about the overall trend among the group's thoughts.

Data Validity and Reliability

For a number of methodological reasons, the data's validity is unaffected even though it was used in summary form:

- First, the Google Forms platform automatically generates the percentages, ensuring numerical correctness in response processing and minimising errors in human calculations.
- Second, the data accurately reflect the participants' answers, maintaining the confidentiality of the information supplied without outside interference.
- Third, when the objective is to comprehend broad trends rather than inferential statistical analyses, the summation of percentages permits a descriptive analysis that is appropriate for exploratory and baseline investigations.
- Lastly, to ensure the accuracy of the original results' depiction, the data was meticulously transcribed and arranged by hand to prevent any interpretational deviations.

Thus, the aggregated data obtained from Google Forms provide a valid and reliable basis for descriptive analysis, contributing to the understanding of the trends in the perceptions and attitudes of the participants in relation to the research purpose of the study.

Ethics

The research adhered to ethical guidelines. Participants gave their voluntary agreement, were kept anonymous, and were made aware of the study's goal. At any time, they might leave without incurring any fees.

Results

Quantitative Results

The Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was distributed to 281 assistant teachers across Albania.

AXIS I: Understanding Autism in Inclusive Education

Aspect	Agree / Completely agree(%)	Disagree / Completely disagree (%)	Trend
Understanding autism characteristics	76.8%	2.2%	Strong theoretical knowledge
Adapting teaching approaches	22.3%	53.9%	Some difficulty remains, but ¼ yes
Understanding sensory experience	47.4%	28.6%	Greater sensitivity needed
Understanding sensory experience	14.6%	65.4%	Unclear differentiation
Understanding sensory experience	26.6%	54.3%	Requires didactic specialization
Communicating with autistic children	30.7%	43.9%	Nearly half feel uncertain
Access to resources	54.5%	21.2%	Insufficient materials
Collaboration with teachers	40.1%	36.6%	Limited teamwork

Summary: Support teachers demonstrate a good conceptual grasp of autism but struggle with practical interpretation, collaboration, and resource access.

AXIS II: Understanding Social Skills in Autism

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Understanding social skill deficits	85	3	High theoretical understanding
Differentiating delay vs. behavior	21	50	Conceptual confusion
Recognizing social initiative	15	68	Major practical challenge
Supporting non-verbal children	24	51	Need for alternative communication
Teaching implicit social norms	34	37	Partial competence
Explaining social issues to peers	19	65	Insufficient sensitivity
Creating social opportunities	27	49	Requires hands-on training
Teaching empathy	63	10	Good conceptual awareness

Summary: Teachers understand autism's social dimension but need applied training in social facilitation, peer mediation, and structured play interventions.

AXIS III: Classroom Challenges

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Adequate classroom resources	18.9	59.3	Severe lack of resources
Balancing student needs	37.1	28.8	Challenging for most
Preparedness of classroom teachers	36.4	35.3	Uneven training levels

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Institutional support	56.3	17.1	Positive but inconsistent
Social stigma	36.6	26.4	Still evident
Coordination with parents/specialists	39.8	30.1	Needs structure

Summary: Inclusive classrooms still face resource shortages, space limitations, and poor coordination among education stakeholders.

AXIS IV: Professional Training and Development Needs

Aspect	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Trend
Lack of specialized knowledge	26.2	48	Deeper expertise required
Uncertainty about best practices	29.1	42.2	Widespread uncertainty
Lack of continuous training	43.3	33	Broader training needed
Knowledge of social strategies	70.3	5.4	Good theoretical base
Adequate practical training	53.6	13	Moderate results
Insufficient training on social skills	33.6	36.5	Structured practice needed
Desire for professional growth	74.3	4.7	Strong demand
Lack of national training infrastructure	57.7	20.1	Systemic gap

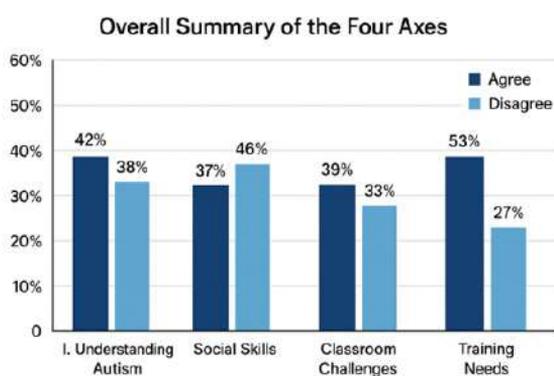
Summary: Teaching assistants express a strong need for continuous, practical, and social-skill-oriented training. There remains a gap between theory and classroom application.

General Summary of the Four Axes

Axis	Average percentage who agree/strongly agree	Average percentage who oppose/strongly oppose	Challenge level
I. Understanding Autism	42%	38%	Average
II. Understanding social skills in autism	37%	46%	High
III. Classroom Challenges	39%	33%	Average - High
IV. Training Needs	53%	27%	High (training needed)

Interpretive Summary

The survey results indicate that while support teachers in Albania have a solid theoretical understanding of autism and its impact on social development, there are significant gaps in practical application, resource availability, collaboration with other educators and use of effective strategies in the classroom. Continuous, hands-on professional development is crucial to lessen the distance between theory and practice and to ensure effective support for children with autism in inclusive classrooms.



Qualitative results

Thematic Analysis according to Braun & Clarke (2006) In their work, Braun and Clarke (2006), explain that a thematic analysis is a qualitative technique for finding, examining, and summarising patterns (themes) in data. It offers an adaptable and user-friendly method for evaluating qualitative data, including transcripts of interviews, and is especially helpful in psychological and educational research. Thematic analysis offers a comprehensive, intricate, and sophisticated description of the data and helps researchers understand how participants interpret their experiences.

Why was the methodology of Braun & Clarke selected?

The function of shadow teachers in Albanian inclusive education for autistic children is examined in this study. In light of the exploratory nature of the baseline study and the necessity of comprehending a range of experiences and perspectives, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis is especially suitable. In addition to supporting an inductive approach and generating insights based on participants' own words, it enables a methodical yet flexible interpretation of data gathered from semi-structured interviews.

Putting the Six Phases of Braun & Clarke to Use

According to the six outlined stages by Braun and Clarke, 15 semi-structured interviews with support instructors were analysed:

Phase 1: Getting to Know the Data

All the interviews were transcribed and read several times to gain a deep understanding of the given content. Key observations and initial ideas were noted.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

The data were systematically coded to capture significant elements. Coding was at both the semantic level (exploring direct meanings) and the latent level (implied meanings). Examples of initial codes include: “daily routine”, “collaboration with the classroom teacher”, “emotional support”, “lack of clarity in roles”, “need for training”, “improvement in behavior”, etc.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

The codings were organized into broader themes. Codes such as “emotional and behavioral support”, “academic support”, and “daily structure” were grouped into a theme called “Core Duties of the Support Teacher.” Other themes included: “Collaboration and Teamwork,” “Impact on Student Involvement,” “Training and Professional Development,” and “Systemic Challenges and Gaps.”

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

To make sure the themes were externally distinguishable and internally coherent, they were examined in light of the coded data and the complete data set. A few codes were reclassified in order to increase coherence and reinforce thematic boundaries.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

The themes were defined and named to reflect the essence of the data. Descriptions were developed for each theme to explain its relevance in relation to the research question.

Phase 6: Report Drafting

A coherent narrative was constructed that linked the themes to important extracts from the data and illustrated the significance of the findings in the context of inclusive education for children with autism in Albania.

Identified Themes and Interpretations

Theme 1: Fundamental Tasks of the Help Instructor

Participants listed a variety of responsibilities, such as providing emotional support, controlling behaviour, advising the child academically, and making sure the youngster participates in class activities.

Theme 2: Cooperation and Cooperation

Each participant emphasised how important it is to collaborate with teachers, parents, and school psychologists. However, the quality and intensity of this partnership varied.

Theme 3: Impact on Students' Inclusion

Instructors noticed significant improvements in the social and academic engagement of autistic children, such as a decrease in troublesome behaviours, increased attendance, and involvement in group activities.

Theme 4: Training and Professional Development

There was a common view of the need for more practical and ongoing training. While support was available in some cases, most training opportunities were inadequate and largely private.

Theme 5: Challenges and Systemic Gaps

Participants mentioned several barriers, including lack of clarity in defining the role, excessive support from other staff, lack of resources and fragmented collaboration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings

The quantitative analysis data revealed considerable knowledge about autism and children's social skills, as well as positive perceptions of the impact of the support teacher on their inclusion in school activities. However, the data also highlighted the need for more adequate training and systemic challenges that affect the effectiveness of the support teacher role.

The qualitative analysis of the support teacher interviews highlighted key themes that explain these findings. The complex tasks of the support teacher (Theme 1) are closely related to the quantitative data on engagement in academic and social activities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the influence on student inclusion (Theme 3) supports the quantitative findings demonstrating increases in social engagement and decreases in problematic behaviours, collaboration and teamwork (Theme 2) offer context for differences in perceptions of support and the efficacy of collaboration.

At the same time, the need for more practical training and systemic challenges (Theme 4 and Theme 5) reinforce the quantitative findings on the lack of proper opportunities for professional development and structural barriers that affect work effectiveness. This synergy between quantitative and qualitative analysis highlights the importance of clear policies, ongoing training, and sufficient resources to improve inclusive practices in Albanian schools (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2010; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). To sum it up, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a complete picture of the role of the support teacher: quantitative data measures knowledge and perceptions, while qualitative analysis provides context and interpretation of real-world experience. This integration emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to supporting children with autism and strengthening inclusive education in Albania.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Universities and training centers should design accredited programs for the training of assistant teachers.
- Schools should adopt interagency collaboration models that include teachers, therapists, and families.

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Time, Technology, and Social Pressure: Positive Discipline in Contemporary Family Life

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Abstract

In the context of modern parenting, the application of positive discipline faces numerous challenges that hinder its consistent and effective implementation. This mini-study explored parents' knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to positive discipline, aiming to identify factors that either facilitate or obstruct its use in daily life. The research focused on three key barriers affecting parents' ability to foster healthy educational relationships with their children: lack of time, the influence of technology, and social pressure. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 110 employed parents aged 30–45 years, each with one or more children aged 3–6 years, residing in Tirana. Using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study examined parental perceptions of stress, parenting styles, the impact of technology, and children's adaptive behavior within the constraints of limited time. The findings reveal a gradual shift away from authoritarian parenting styles, ongoing challenges in managing children's technology use, and increasing parental stress due to time pressure. Most participants reported seeking parenting support primarily through the internet—especially social media—rather than consulting educational professionals. These results highlight the urgent need for targeted, expert-led training programs to enhance young parents' skills in applying positive discipline and promoting children's healthy emotional development.

Keywords: *positive discipline, modern parenting, technology, time constraints, social pressure, emotional education*

Introduction

Amid rapid social and technological transformations, positive parenting and positive discipline have become central to contemporary discussions on education and child development. Rooted in the principles of positive psychology, these approaches emphasize the cultivation of emotional competencies, mutual respect, and cooperative learning—rather than punishment or authoritarian control (Nelsen, Erwin, & Duffy, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Within this framework, positive education represents the practical application of these values within both families and educational institutions, aiming to raise children who are self-aware, empathetic, and responsible (Gottfredson, 2021).

This study explores how three interrelated factors—time constraints, the influence of technology, and social pressure—affect parents’ ability to establish and maintain healthy educational relationships with their children. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to supporting parents as they navigate the growing complexity of modern family life.

Parenting is a continuous and evolving process, shaped by daily experiences, reflection, and interaction within a broader social and cultural context. Parental identity develops through this lived experience, simultaneously shaping and transforming the individual self in a process of reciprocal growth. However, parenting today differs markedly from the models that shaped previous generations. Many parents question the effectiveness of the disciplinary strategies used during their own upbringing and often face criticism from older generations who view modern approaches as too permissive. Statements such as “a child needs a slap” or “you were spanked, and you turned out fine” reflect lingering cultural attitudes that valorize punitive discipline.

Young parents today frequently find themselves caught between the internal pressure to parent differently and the external expectations imposed by family traditions and societal norms. This tension often leads to uncertainty in making consistent and informed parenting choices.

According to Gadeau (2019), positive education seeks to establish a more horizontal relationship between parent and child—one grounded in partnership, dialogue, and flexible boundaries—replacing the traditional model of authority. This shift represents a profound change in how educational relationships are understood within modern parenting. Children, as active and developing beings, naturally express curiosity, independence, and a desire to test limits—tendencies that can sometimes conflict with parental expectations and disciplinary approaches. Understanding and managing these dynamics through empathy, communication, and mutual respect lies at the heart of positive discipline.

Aim of study

To explore Albanian parents' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding positive discipline, and to identify the internal and external factors that facilitate or hinder its consistent implementation in everyday parenting.

Objectives

- To assess parents' understanding and perceptions of the concept of positive discipline.
- To examine the daily disciplinary practices used by parents and their alignment with positive discipline principles.
- To identify emotional, social, and technological challenges that affect the application of positive discipline.
- To analyze parents' emotional self-regulation and its role in maintaining respectful and constructive communication with children.
- To investigate parents' attitudes toward technology and its impact on parent–child interaction and discipline.
- To evaluate the need for parental support, training, and collaboration with educational institutions.

Literature Review

The concept of positive discipline originates from Alfred Adler's individual psychology, which views human behavior as driven by the fundamental need for belonging, significance, and connection with others. According to Adler, misbehavior often reflects an individual's attempt to find a sense of belonging within a social group. His student Rudolf Dreikurs expanded this theory by identifying four primary goals underlying children's misbehavior—attention-seeking, power, revenge, and avoidance—each linked to a child's perception of social inclusion or exclusion.

Dreikurs (1957) advocated for the use of natural and logical consequences instead of punishment, viewing discipline as an educational process that promotes cooperation, responsibility, and moral development. Encouragement, rather than fear or external rewards, was considered the cornerstone of discipline, as it fosters self-regulation and a sense of competence. Calm and respectful parental responses to children's mistakes preserve emotional connection and build trust—values that remain at the core of positive discipline today.

Building on Adlerian principles, positive discipline has evolved into an approach that promotes learning through relationships based on mutual respect and collaboration, rejecting punitive or authoritarian control. Positive parenting extends this philosophy to everyday family life, guiding education through love, clear boundaries, and emotional support. As Gadeau (2021) explains, positive education assumes that children are capable of understanding the reasons behind their behavior and can make rational decisions to change it. This approach emphasizes moral reasoning, where children learn from the natural outcomes of their actions rather than through imposed punishment.

The emergence of positive psychology, introduced by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), reinforced these ideas by shifting attention from correcting deficits to cultivating personal strengths, virtues, and well-being. Within this framework, programs such as Triple P – Positive Parenting Program (Sanders, 2012) translate positive psychology principles into practical parenting strategies aimed at enhancing emotional communication and reducing coercive discipline. From this perspective, positive discipline integrates warmth and structure, seeing discipline as a guiding process that fosters self-control, empathy, and cooperation (Nelsen, 2006; Nelson, Erwin, & Duffy, 2015).

Despite its advantages, implementing positive discipline in modern family life presents significant challenges. The fast pace of daily life, combined with professional obligations and limited family time, often prevents parents from maintaining the patience and emotional availability required for this approach (Sege & Siegel, 2018). Parents frequently report feelings of guilt or inadequacy when unable to meet their own expectations, which can result in inconsistent boundaries or excessive permissiveness (Coyne & White, 2020). As a result, positive discipline sometimes risks becoming a theoretical ideal rather than a consistent practice.

Technology as a Contextual Factor in Modern Parenting

In addition to time and social pressures, the presence of technology has become a defining feature of contemporary parenting. While digital tools offer educational benefits, they also introduce new challenges for parents attempting to sustain emotional engagement with their children. Research suggests that excessive screen exposure in early childhood is associated with difficulties in self-regulation, attention, and language development (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Leung et al., 2025). The use of screens as a means of distraction or comfort may reduce opportunities for face-to-face interaction, an essential component of emotional learning and secure attachment.

Nonetheless, technology is not inherently detrimental; its impact depends largely on how it is integrated within family routines. Nelsen (2021), in *Help! My*

Child Is Addicted to Screens (Yikes! So Am I!), recommends applying positive discipline principles to digital contexts through collaborative family practices—such as holding regular meetings to set shared rules, designating “screen-free meals,” and scheduling special parent–child time. These strategies emphasize connection and communication rather than control, ensuring that digital boundaries remain relational rather than punitive.

A recent systematic review (2025) on children under five reinforces this relational view, showing that parental modeling, self-efficacy, and knowledge are key factors influencing children’s screen habits. In families where parents demonstrate mindful media use and prioritize interaction, children tend to exhibit lower screen time and better emotional regulation. Thus, technology management becomes one dimension of modern positive discipline, requiring parents to balance digital engagement with opportunities for real-world connection.

Adapting Positive Discipline to Contemporary Realities

Given these interrelated challenges—limited time, social expectations, and the digital environment—modern parenting calls for a flexible and realistic understanding of positive discipline. Gadeau (2021) warns against perfectionism, noting that the pressure to apply positive discipline flawlessly can lead to stress and guilt, undermining emotional connection. Instead, he advocates for an authentic approach, where parents strive to remain present, empathetic, and consistent within the constraints of everyday life.

In this view, positive discipline should not be seen as a rigid formula but as a dynamic framework adaptable to the changing conditions of family life. When practiced with awareness and compassion, it enables parents to nurture emotional intelligence, mutual respect, and self-discipline in their children—skills that are increasingly vital in today’s rapidly changing, technology-mediated world.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of parents’ knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding positive discipline. A semi-structured questionnaire served as the primary data-collection instrument and was distributed electronically via Google Forms.

Participants

The target population consisted of parents whose children were enrolled in public and private early education programs within the city of Tirana ($N = 110$). Eligibility required participants to be the parent of at least one child aged 3 to 6 years. The sample reflected diversity in gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background, ensuring representation of a wide range of parenting experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection Instruments

The semi-structured questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended items designed to capture demographic information, familiarity with positive discipline, perceived challenges, and sources of parenting support. The online format facilitated accessibility and confidentiality for participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to evaluate parents' familiarity with the principles and application of positive discipline.

For the qualitative component, a thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns, meanings, and shared attitudes within participants' narrative responses. Data were manually coded and organized into themes and subthemes that reflected common experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding the implementation of positive discipline in everyday parenting practices.

Integration of Methods

Combining quantitative and qualitative data provided both measurable insights and a deeper interpretive understanding of how parents perceive and apply positive discipline within the context of modern family life. This methodological triangulation enhanced the validity and richness of the findings by linking statistical trends with parents' lived experiences.

Results

Data analysis was conducted based on parents' responses to the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The processed material revealed several key themes related to parents' knowledge, practices, challenges, and needs concerning positive discipline.

Knowledge and Perceptions of Positive Discipline

The majority of parents (66.7%) reported having heard of the concept of positive discipline, while 30.6% had not, and 2.8% were unsure. This indicates growing awareness, although understanding often remains general and lacks a structured theoretical foundation. Most parents perceive positive discipline as an educational approach rooted in love, respect, and nonviolence. They define it as "education through respect, love, and without violence," "teaching responsibility and self-discipline," or "emotional support and open communication." Their statements emphasize a desire to set boundaries without physical, verbal, or psychological punishment, striving instead to engage through dialogue: "Discipline by setting behavioral boundaries and rules through constant communication and interaction. Physical and psychological violence is completely useless." However, the analysis suggests that these insights are primarily acquired through independent sources such as social media, rather than formal training or education.

Daily Disciplinary Practices

Interview analysis revealed that communication is the most frequently mentioned disciplinary tool. Terms such as "dialogue," "explanation," "conversation," and "appropriate language" appear consistently, reflecting the importance parents place on emotional connection and verbal engagement with their children. "I use a calm tone of voice to convey the seriousness of the conversation." "I usually count to three to give my 4-year-old son time to prepare." Parents aim to avoid confrontation and punishment, using communication to help children understand their behavior and its consequences. Many report using positive reinforcement and logical consequences: "Of course I reward good behavior." "In case of misbehavior, I connect cause and consequence, e.g., removing a desired item." In some cases, "good behavior" is tied to high expectations, which may create emotional pressure for the child. Nevertheless, the overarching goal remains the development of responsibility and awareness, rather than blind obedience.

Emotional Sensitivity and Parental Self-Regulation

Another theme explored was emotional self-regulation. Parents emphasized efforts to remain calm, avoid raising their voices, and support children in managing emotions: “I try to help him regulate his emotions by encouraging verbal expression and providing a safe space where he knows I’m present. This reflects a consistent effort to model calm and mindful behavior. However, many parents acknowledged that this requires significant effort, especially when feeling tired or overwhelmed.

Boundaries and Exceptional Cases

In isolated instances, parents mentioned minimal physical interventions, such as a light tap on the hand, in situations involving safety risks. These actions were described not as punishment but as protective measures: “Only in very serious cases, when there’s danger, I’ve grabbed his hand firmly to stop him. This indicates that parents are aware of the moral boundaries of positive parenting but may react instinctively in extreme situations to protect their child.

Challenges in Implementing Positive Discipline

Interviews revealed several key obstacles that hinder the consistent application of positive discipline: Emotional and physical exhaustion: Parents feel tired, lacking time and patience. “Patience is the biggest challenge. It gets harder when children don’t listen immediately. Impact of technology: Most parents view technology as a serious barrier: “It’s the main object making discipline impossible today.” “It creates dependency and aggression; it’s not easy to control.” Parental inconsistency and generational influence: Young parents noted discrepancies between themselves and pressure from extended family: “It’s often confused with not saying ‘No’ to the child. Inherited models make consistency difficult.” Creating a realistic worldview: Some parents worry that overly positive approaches may foster unrealistic expectations: “Maybe we’re teaching children about a world that isn’t real, because life isn’t always gentle.”

Attitudes Toward Technology

Two distinct perspectives emerged: Critical stance: Most parents see technology as a disruptive factor for discipline, focus, and family interaction. Flexible stance: A smaller group views technology as an unavoidable reality that must be managed: “My child lives in a time when these things exist, and I don’t see the need to deprive him—though with limited screen time.”

Need for Parental Support

Fewer than 50% of parents had participated in any form of professional training or counseling. Many expressed the need for practical training, concrete advice, and emotional support: “We need concrete examples, not just general advice. We want to know how to apply it in real situations.”

Mothers also called for greater involvement from fathers, the creation of support groups, and closer collaboration with educational institutions and professionals.

Discussion

The results indicate that Albanian parents are generally open and receptive to the philosophy of positive discipline. They demonstrate a clear awareness of the importance of communication, respect, and positive reinforcement, yet often feel unprepared to implement this approach consistently. Understanding of positive discipline tends to be emotional and intuitive rather than grounded in theoretical frameworks. This suggests that the concept has been internalized through experience rather than formal education. Nevertheless, parents express a strong desire to improve their relationships with their children and to avoid punitive methods.

The disciplinary practices reported reflect a shift toward communication and dialogue, where words replace punishment. Discipline is viewed as a collaborative process rather than an act of imposition. This approach fosters a sense of responsibility and mutual respect, helping children understand boundaries through explanation and logical consequences rather than fear.

However, the findings also highlight significant challenges that affect the consistent application of positive discipline. Daily stress, time constraints, excessive use of technology, and discrepancies between parenting partners hinder the sustainability of this approach. Parents recognize the value of calm and empathetic communication but often struggle to maintain such behavior during moments of tension.

Additionally, some parents express uncertainty about the boundaries of positive discipline, fearing that an overly gentle approach may lead to a lack of authority. This underscores the need for clarification and practical guidance to ensure that positive discipline is understood as a balance between structure and warmth, rather than an absence of rules.

From a social perspective, the findings point to the need for supportive policies on parental education, training programs, and stronger collaboration between families, schools, and institutions. Parents are eager to learn and grow, but they lack the tools and resources necessary to do so in a sustainable way.

Focus on interpersonal relationships and social skills parents can create opportunities to foster social skills through games and activities that promote cooperation and communication.

Conclusions

Albanian parents show openness and a generally positive attitude toward the philosophy of positive discipline, valuing communication, respect, and emotional support.

While many parents are familiar with the concept, their understanding is often intuitive and emotionally driven rather than grounded in formal theoretical knowledge.

Parents strive to replace punitive methods with dialogue and logical consequences, aiming to foster responsibility and mutual respect.

The consistent application of positive discipline is challenged by emotional fatigue, time constraints, technological distractions, and intergenerational differences in parenting styles.

There is a clear need for practical guidance, training programs, and institutional support to help parents implement positive discipline effectively.

Emotional presence, patience, and collaborative parent–child relationships are essential competencies for successful positive parenting, yet they remain among the most difficult to sustain in modern family life.

Ultimately, a gentle, humane, and sustainable approach is needed—one in which communication, love, and emotional presence form the foundation of every effort toward the positive education of children.

In main conclusion, patience, emotional self-regulation, and parent–child collaboration emerge as essential competencies for the successful implementation of positive discipline. These elements represent not only the foundation of healthy parenting but also the most pressing challenges in contemporary parental life.

Recommendations

Training Programs on Positive Discipline Structured training initiatives can serve as promising strategies to address the challenges posed by technology and support parents in applying positive discipline effectively.

Establishing Clear and Consistent Boundaries for Technology Use Limiting screen time and setting firm boundaries helps children develop self-regulation and prioritize social and educational activities.

Modeling Healthy Technology Behavior Parents should exemplify balanced and mindful use of digital devices to reinforce healthy habits in their children.

Engaging in Offline Activities Participation in peer play, reading, and sports can strengthen emotional bonds and support holistic child development beyond screen-based interaction.

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Stressors and coping strategies in a sample of Albanian Adolescents: A mixed-methods study

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Abstract

Adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to environmental and internal stressors with clear implications for mental health and academic functioning. This study examined the relationship between common stressors, coping strategies, and perceived academic impact among secondary school students using a mixed methods questionnaire that integrated multiple-choice items and brief free-response prompts.. Quantitative results showed moderate awareness of stress-management techniques, with 51.6% reporting they were somewhat familiar and 38.7% not familiar. The most frequently cited focus barriers were distractions from social media and noise (58.1%) and loss of motivation (25.8%). Coping patterns centered on distraction and music (32.3%), with smaller shares reporting exercise or breathing techniques (12.9% each); many students reported rare or no use of mindfulness or relaxation practices (41.9% and 35.5%, respectively). Sleep was often insufficient, with 51.6% sleeping only 5–6 hours on school nights. Most respondents perceived stress as harming academic performance (61.3%), though a minority described stress as motivating. Qualitative responses highlighted the role of social support, therapy, organized routines, quiet spaces, and individualized activities such as swimming or creative play. Findings suggest actionable levers for schools and families: sleep hygiene, simple relaxation

skills, structured study routines, and guidance on digital distraction. Future research should test brief, school-feasible interventions and evaluate longer-term outcomes.

Keywords: *adolescent stress, coping strategies, sleep, mindfulness, academic performance*

Introduction

Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period where internal and external stressors shape mental health and daily functioning. When a stressor occurs, homeostasis, the body's ability to maintain a stable internal environment, is disrupted and a coordinated stress response is triggered through neuroendocrine and autonomic pathways. This response is adaptive in the short term, protecting the organism from threat. Prolonged or excessive activation, however, can contribute to adverse physical and psychological outcomes.

This study focuses on stress in teenagers and young adults. It examines common stressors in daily life, the strategies adolescents report using to manage stress, and the ways stress is perceived to affect academic performance. To provide a fuller picture, the study combines multiple-choice items with short free-response prompts and analyzes both quantitative patterns and qualitative themes.

Study aims

1. Describe prevalent stressors among adolescents.
2. Identify commonly used coping strategies.
3. Examine perceived effects of stress on focus and academic performance.
4. Summarize brief qualitative accounts that illustrate how adolescents manage stress in real contexts.
5. Highlight practical levers for schools and families that align with adolescents' reported needs.

Chronic, uncontrollable stress

This paper focuses on chronic, uncontrollable stress, commonly modeled in three forms: repeated restraint, chronic intermittent cold stress, and chronic unpredictable stress. These forms illustrate physiological and behavioral adaptations that mirror human stress experiences (McEwen, 2017; Leigh et al., 2023).

Repeated physical restraint can produce a sustained sense of loss of control, signaling risk to homeostasis and triggering a stress response with corticosterone in rodents and cortisol in humans. Short-term effects observed in animal models include enhanced hippocampal-dependent context freezing and reduced open-field exploration. Over time, there will most likely be dendritic atrophy of the hippocampus present. In adolescent male rats, repeated restraint stress has been linked to binge-like alcohol use patterns (Sánchez-Marín et al., 2022).

Unpredictable, random stressors that mirror daily life chaos have been associated in animal models with decreased spontaneous firing rates, increased firing irregularity, and behavioral changes. Research connects chronic unpredictability with elevated anxiety and attention-deficit symptoms in adolescents (Kwarteng et al., 2022). Reviews also outline broader systemic and neurobiological consequences (McEwen, 2017) and gastrointestinal effects via the microbiota–gut–brain axis (Leigh et al., 2023).

Neuroscience-informed strategies to manage stress

Treatment strategies are commonly grouped into pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical approaches. For adolescents, non-pharmaceutical approaches are emphasized because they build durable coping skills without medication.

Pharmaceutical solutions

Monoamine neurotransmission-targeting drugs. Conventional antidepressants inhibit reuptake of monoamines such as serotonin and noradrenaline at the presynaptic neuron, increasing signaling at the postsynaptic site and helping correct imbalances associated with depression (Monoamine neurotransmitter, n.d.).

Modafinil. A prescription agent used to promote wakefulness and support cognition through effects on monoaminergic systems. It is approved for sleep-related disorders and has been observed to improve episodic and working memory in remitted depression with persistent cognitive symptoms (Smith & Doe, 2024).

Non-pharmaceutical solutions

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Uses techniques including guided exposure to identify and modify negative thoughts and behaviors, building coping skills to manage stress (Geetanjali, Wahane, & Sharma, 2023).

Mindfulness. Fosters present-moment awareness and non-reactivity, improving emotional regulation and attention in adolescents. Mindfulness programs have been implemented to help individuals cope with modern stress, reduce mental strain, and improve self-regulation, with potential benefits for well-being and organizational outcomes (Geetanjali et al., 2023).

Physical exercise. Physical activity supports mood, reduces stress hormones, and is often reported as a practical first-line strategy in adolescents.

Relaxation techniques

- Music therapy: engages neurochemical pathways, can reduce cortisol, increase parasympathetic activity, stabilize heart rate, and improve attention, including in pre-procedure contexts (Geetanjali et al., 2023).
- Massage therapy: reduces sympathetic arousal and promotes parasympathetic dominance; benefits have been noted around cardiovascular procedures, especially with lavender oil, connecting to aromatherapy (Geetanjali et al., 2023).
- Aromatherapy: olfactory stimulation interfaces with limbic circuits involved in emotion; lavender oil shows anxiolytic properties (Geetanjali et al., 2023).

Methodology

Research design

The questionnaire for this study was designed with the objective of gathering relevant data to confirm the personal conclusions derived from the researcher's prior observations and hypotheses. To ensure that the questions effectively addressed the research objectives, the development process involved careful consideration of the key themes and information required for analysis.

Instrument development

The first step in designing the questionnaire involved identifying the central research questions that needed to be answered to validate the study's conclusions. These questions were carefully constructed to directly address the themes that were central to the research focus.

The questionnaire was organized to ensure clarity and accessibility for the target demographic of teenagers. The questions were structured in a way that made them comprehensible to this age group, taking into account their typical language and cognitive levels. Effort was made to use simple, concise wording to minimize potential confusion and ensure that the questions could be easily interpreted by a broad range of respondents. This approach was intended to improve the reliability of the responses by making it easier for participants to provide accurate answers.

Sampling and Participants

The study involved 32 adolescents aged 15–18 enrolled in secondary schools in Tirana. Participants were recruited through voluntary response after receiving an information sheet distributed by school counselors. Participation was anonymous, and no identifying data were collected. Parental consent was obtained for minors.

Ethical Considerations

The research followed the ethical standards of the European University of Tirana's Department of Psychology. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of responses.

Administration

Additionally, the questionnaire was organized logically, with questions progressing from general to more specific. This sequencing allowed for a smooth flow of thought for the respondents, reduced participant fatigue, and encouraged higher engagement throughout the survey.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies) to identify patterns of stress familiarity, stressors, coping strategies, and perceived effects on academic performance. Qualitative responses were reviewed thematically, allowing recurring patterns and illustrative examples to emerge.

Results

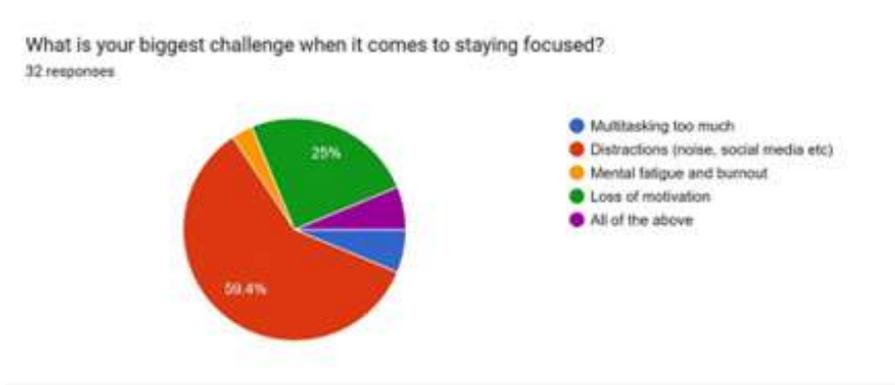
Familiarity with neuroscience strategies

Most respondents (51.6%) reported being somewhat familiar with neuroscience-based stress strategies. Another 38.7% said they were not familiar at all, while 9.7% were very familiar.

Challenges in staying focused

The two most common difficulties were distractions such as social media and noise (59.4%) and loss of motivation (25%). A smaller proportion reported multitasking (6.3%), mental fatigue and burnout (3.1%), or all of the above (6.3%).

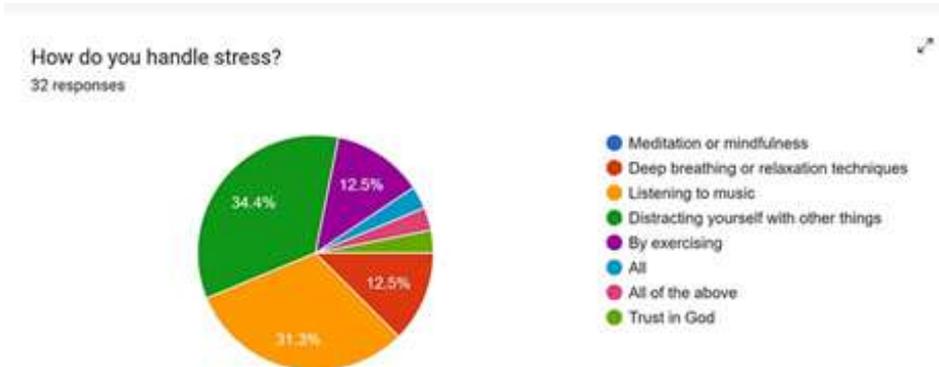
FIGURE 1. Biggest challenges when staying focused (n = 32).



Stress management strategies

The most frequently used strategies were listening to music (31.3%) and spiritual coping, such as prayer or trust in a higher power (34.4%). Smaller proportions reported exercise (12.5%), relaxation/breathing (12.5%), mindfulness (6.3%), or a mix of multiple approaches (3.1%).

FIGURE 2. Stress management strategies reported by adolescents (n = 32).



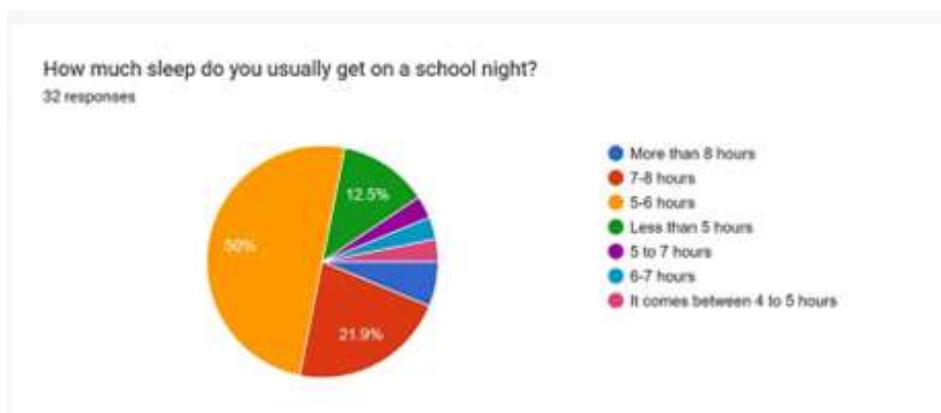
Impact of stress on school performance

Most respondents (61.3%) stated stress significantly affected their school performance. Another 32.3% said it somewhat affected them, while 6.5% felt it had no impact. Interestingly, 16.1% reported stress pushed them to study harder, improving their grades.

Sleep patterns

On school nights, half of the respondents (50%) reported sleeping 5–6 hours. Another 21.9% slept 7–8 hours, while smaller percentages slept less than 5 hours (12.5%), more than 8 hours (6.3%), or 6–7 hours (6.3%).

FIGURE 3. Sleep duration on school nights (n = 32).



Other themes (qualitative responses)

Students also described personal experiences with stress, mentioning therapy, exercise, prayer, quiet spaces, reading, and walking. Some described counterproductive strategies such as procrastination or avoidance. As one respondent explained, “When I feel stressed, I go for a walk alone to clear my head.” Another noted, “Noise in the classroom makes it impossible to focus.” These examples illustrate how coping is often sensory and situational.

Discussion

Familiarity with neuroscience-based strategies

The results showed that more than half of the adolescents (51.6%) were somewhat familiar with neuroscience-based stress management strategies, while 38.7% were not familiar. Only a small minority (9.7%) reported strong familiarity. This indicates that while awareness exists, detailed knowledge is limited. The gap highlights the need for more accessible education about how neuroscience can guide everyday stress-reduction practices in schools and families. This pattern reflects the gap between general awareness and active application of neuroscience-informed stress-reduction practices in school settings (Geetanjali et al., 2023).

Challenges in staying focused

Distractions from social media and noise, along with loss of motivation, were the two most common barriers. These findings are consistent with existing research emphasizing the mental toll of constant digital interruptions and multitasking. Similar findings have been reported globally, where excessive social media exposure correlates with reduced concentration and increased anxiety symptoms (Brown & Green, 2023; Kwarteng et al., 2022). A smaller group cited mental fatigue and burnout, reflecting how stress can undermine sustained attention. The presence of multiple challenges suggests that interventions should not only target external distractions but also internal motivational resources.

Stress management strategies

The strategies most often used by participants included listening to music, trust in higher power, and exercise. These results emphasize the personalized nature of coping mechanisms. Similar evidence highlights how cultural and spiritual coping can provide emotional stability, complementing behavioral interventions such as exercise (Geetanjali et al., 2023; Basso & Suzuki, 2017). Music therapy and spiritual practices were both common, pointing to the importance of cultural and individual contexts in how adolescents manage stress. Exercise, while less frequently chosen, is strongly supported in the literature as an effective non-pharmacological intervention for stress relief.

Impact of stress on academic performance

A large majority (61.3%) reported that stress negatively influenced academic performance, often leading to avoidance of tasks due to feelings of overwhelm. At the same time, a smaller but significant group (16.1%) reported that stress pushed them to study harder and improve grades. This dual role of stress—debilitating for some and motivating for others—reflects the complex relationship between stress and performance. It supports the view that moderate levels of stress can sometimes enhance achievement, while excessive stress undermines it.

Sleep and stress

Half of the respondents reported sleeping only 5–6 hours per school night, which is below recommended levels for adolescents. Inadequate sleep is known to exacerbate stress and reduce cognitive functioning, suggesting a cycle in which stress both reduces sleep quality and is worsened by it. These findings underline

the need for health education about the role of sleep in stress regulation and academic performance. This aligns with McEwen's (2017) research on stress-related disruption of circadian rhythms and cognitive fatigue in adolescents.

Mindfulness and relaxation practices

Although mindfulness and relaxation are well-established strategies for managing stress, most participants reported rarely or never practicing them. This indicates an opportunity for schools and communities to introduce structured, simple programs in mindfulness and relaxation that could be integrated into daily routines.

Qualitative insights

Personal accounts reinforced the quantitative findings, with adolescents describing strategies such as therapy, walking, reading, and quiet spaces. Others described avoidance behaviors or procrastination, showing the range of coping styles. These narratives add depth to the numerical patterns, illustrating how adolescents experiment with both adaptive and less adaptive strategies when dealing with stress.

Limitations and future research

The study's limitations include a small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, which may be affected by recall bias or social desirability. Despite these constraints, the findings provide useful insights into adolescent stressors, coping strategies, and perceptions. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, test specific interventions in school settings, and examine the long-term impact of stress management training on academic performance and well-being. Given that participants were from a single urban school, results may not represent rural or socioeconomically diverse adolescent populations.

Conclusions

This study highlights important trends in how adolescents perceive and manage stress. The majority of participants were only somewhat familiar with neuroscience-based strategies, revealing a gap in knowledge that schools and families could address through practical education.

Distractions from social media and noise, together with loss of motivation, were the most common obstacles to focus. Coping strategies varied, but listening

to music, prayer, and exercise were prominent. These results emphasize the need for individualized approaches to stress management that respect cultural and personal contexts.

Stress was found to have a largely negative impact on academic performance, often leading to avoidance of tasks, though for some students stress served as a motivator. This dual effect illustrates the complex role stress plays in learning and performance.

Sleep patterns were another critical factor: half of the respondents reported only 5–6 hours of sleep on school nights, a level insufficient for healthy development and cognitive functioning. The lack of consistent mindfulness or relaxation practice further indicates that students are not fully engaging with strategies that could help regulate stress.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of promoting balanced routines, adequate rest, and simple, accessible stress-reduction techniques among adolescents. Interventions should focus on building awareness of effective strategies, encouraging healthy habits, and providing supportive environments in both schools and families. These findings underscore the potential of integrating stress-management education within the school curriculum as part of preventive mental health initiatives.

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The Opportunities of Alternative Education in the Psychoeducational Development of Children with Typical and Atypical Development: An Empirical Study on the TUMO Tirana Experience

M.Sc. Bruno FERRA

Abstract

This study explores whether alternative approaches to education, as applied in centers such as TUMO Tirana, can support the psychoeducational development and intrinsic motivation of children with typical and atypical development in Albania. Grounded in the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson on cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory on competence, autonomy, and social relatedness, the research analyzes the impact of alternative education on these fundamental dimensions of child development.

The study involved 50 participants (25 children with typical development and 25 children with atypical development) who had completed a one-year cycle at TUMO. Data were collected through a mixed-methods approach: a structured questionnaire for parents on observed changes in behavior and emotional development at home, and semi-structured interviews with trainers to capture psychoeducational progress observed within the center's environment.

Findings indicate that participation in a free and creative learning environment such as TUMO increases children's sense of competence, autonomy, and social

connection, with particularly positive effects for children with atypical development. The study also identifies challenges and barriers that must be addressed to strengthen inclusive education in Albania, highlighting the importance of psychoeducational approaches in modern models of alternative education.

Keywords: *alternative education, psychoeducational development, intrinsic motivation, typical and atypical development, self-determination theory*

Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial stage of development during which individuals experience significant cognitive, emotional, and social changes. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, youth at this age enter the stage of formal operations, becoming capable of abstract thinking and more systematic problem-solving (Piaget, 1952). Meanwhile, Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of the social context and the "zone of proximal development," where interaction with peers and mentors enables children to reach higher levels of learning with appropriate support (Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives underline that active and collaborative learning environments can accelerate the cognitive and social development of adolescents.

Psychosocial and motivational needs are also particularly important during adolescence. Erikson argues that at this stage, young people are in the process of forming their identity and resolving the "role confusion" crisis, where competence and self-esteem play a central role (Erikson, 1968). An environment that offers opportunities for success and skill development can prevent feelings of inferiority. Likewise, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory highlights that when basic needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness are met, students show higher intrinsic motivation and more sustained engagement in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This suggests that an educational program fostering independence, skill development, and social interaction would be especially motivating for adolescents.

Children with atypical development—a term in this study referring to those with neurodevelopmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)—face particular challenges in traditional school environments. However, inclusive practices in education have shown that integrating these students with their typically developing peers can bring benefits to both groups. International organizations such as UNESCO prioritize inclusive education, stressing that every child, regardless of ability, should have equal opportunities for development (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, alternative learning environments that offer diverse activities may resonate with

students' multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), allowing children with different aptitudes and profiles to excel in various areas. The TUMO educational program is an example of such an alternative approach: it provides a rich extracurricular curriculum of creative projects in technology and the arts (programming, robotics, graphic design, music, etc.), where young people pursue personalized learning paths according to their interests. Such an environment is expected to encourage active exploration (in line with Piaget's constructivist theory) and creative collaboration (in Vygotsky's spirit), while simultaneously enhancing adolescents' self-confidence and intrinsic motivation (Erikson, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In this context, the aim of this study is to evaluate the psychoeducational impact of the TUMO program on adolescents with typical and atypical development. Specifically, we focus on the development of social skills (e.g., communication and cooperation), emotional skills (self-confidence and sense of competence), and motivation (initiative in learning) after a period of participation in this program. We also assess parents' attitudes (satisfaction and willingness to recommend the program) as well as the impressions of TUMO trainers regarding students' progress. Drawing both on existing literature and empirical data from parent surveys and trainer interviews, the goal is to understand whether and how TUMO's alternative approach contributes to adolescents' personal development compared to expectations from traditional education.

Literature Review

For many years, educators and researchers have experimented with alternative educational approaches beyond the traditional classroom, aiming to foster creativity and active student engagement. Seymour Papert argued that the use of technology and project-based learning can empower children to learn more deeply by constructing tangible artifacts of their knowledge (Papert, 1980). Along these lines, Resnick (2017) promoted the concept of the "lifelong kindergarten," where learning occurs through projects, passion, peers, and play—principles also present in the TUMO program. Empirical research shows that participation in structured after-school programs can lead to meaningful benefits for young people. A meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2010) found that after-school programs designed to support children's personal and social development had positive effects on social skills, self-esteem, and prosocial behavior, compared to peers who did not participate. These findings support the idea that an alternative, practice-oriented, and enjoyable learning environment can help children acquire skills not easily developed during regular school hours.

Other studies have specifically examined the effects of extracurricular participation among adolescents. Larson (2000) emphasized that voluntary

activities (such as clubs and creative projects) play an important role in the development of initiative, since they require young people to set personal goals and persevere in achieving them—something often absent in tasks imposed from above. In a longitudinal study, Fredricks and Eccles (2006) found that adolescents who regularly participated in extracurricular activities showed higher levels of social competence and academic achievement compared to those who were not involved. Although some of these differences may be partly attributed to self-selection factors (e.g., more motivated children being more likely to participate), the findings suggest that a stimulating and opportunity-rich environment, such as that of alternative programs, positively impacts youth development.

Regarding inclusive education, the literature strongly supports the idea that students with special needs can benefit from learning alongside their typically developing peers, while the latter do not experience a decline in achievement—on the contrary, they may develop social competencies such as empathy and understanding. A large-scale analysis by Baker, Wang, and Walberg (1995) reported generally positive results of including students with difficulties in mainstream classes, including improvements in academic performance. Similarly, Staub and Peck (1995) noted that the presence of students with disabilities or developmental disorders does not negatively affect their typical peers; rather, it provides opportunities for learning tolerance and practicing helpful behaviors. On the other hand, students with atypical development can benefit from the positive social and academic models of typical peers. Research has also shown that interventions focused on these children's motivation and interests can be particularly effective in inclusive environments. For example, Koegel et al. (2012) found that when children with autism were included in regular classes and educators used motivational strategies (such as allowing preferred activity choices and applying positive reinforcement), these children displayed increased engagement and positive interactions during lessons.

In summary, the existing literature suggests that: (1) alternative and extracurricular programs, especially those based on technology and creative projects, can positively influence the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young people; and (2) inclusive learning environments can maximize benefits for children with and without special needs, particularly when supported by personalized methods that enhance motivation. These theoretical and empirical findings provide an important framework for interpreting the results of our study on the TUMO program, which combines elements such as personalized learning, project collaboration, and the inclusion of children with diverse developmental backgrounds. The following sections present the methodology adopted and the main findings observed.

Methodology

Participants

The study included 50 parents of adolescents aged 12–15 years whose children had attended the TUMO program. Of these, 25 were parents of children with atypical development (diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism or ADHD), and 25 were parents of children with typical development (no developmental diagnoses). The child sample was almost evenly balanced by gender in both subgroups (in the atypical group, 52% were girls; in the typical group, 44% were girls). The average age of the children was 13.3 years. All adolescents had participated in the TUMO program for at least several months: about one-third of the children in each group had attended for less than six months, while the rest had attended for 6–12 months or longer. In addition to the parents, five TUMO trainers (instructors) were interviewed, each with between one and four years of experience implementing the program with these children.

Instruments

Data were collected using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Parents completed a questionnaire regarding their child's development before and after participation in the TUMO program. Key items included parental evaluations of the child's communication skills (e.g., how open or withdrawn they were in interacting with others), level of self-confidence, and degree of participation in social activities prior to joining TUMO, as well as observed changes after participation (e.g., whether communication improved, whether self-confidence increased). For each of these domains, parents selected a categorical response (e.g., "very withdrawn," "moderate," "very sociable" for communication; or "increased," "remained the same" for observed change). The questionnaire also included items on new developments during the period (e.g., interest in new areas such as technology or art, initiative in creative activities), the perceived overall impact of the program on the child's development ("positive," "neutral," or "negative"), and newly observed behaviors or attitudes. At the end of the questionnaire, parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the TUMO program ("very satisfied," "satisfied," etc.), whether they would recommend it to other parents, and to provide a concrete example from daily life in which they noticed a positive change in their child that they attributed to the TUMO experience.

For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with TUMO trainers. A guide was developed to encourage trainers to share their experiences regarding: student behavior during the first months in the program,

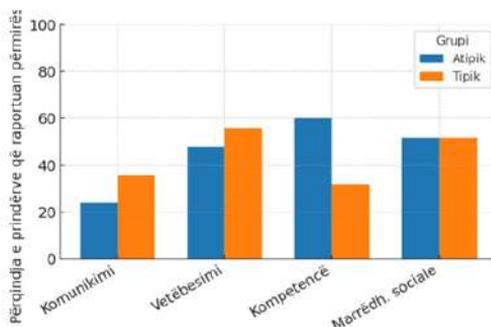
observed changes over time (particularly in social cooperation), differences in learning pace between students with typical and atypical development, the evolution of self-initiative and motivation after several months in the program, student engagement during the self-learning phase compared to group workshops, specific social, emotional, or cognitive improvements observed in children with atypical development, challenges encountered in supporting them, and trainers' overall perspectives on the impact of TUMO's alternative methods on adolescents' personal development. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Procedure

Parent participants were recruited through the TUMO center via an announcement distributed by the staff. The questionnaire was completed electronically and anonymously, after a minimum of six months of program participation (most parents filled it out at the end of the academic year). All responses were kept confidential. Trainer interviews were conducted individually at the TUMO center, each lasting 30–45 minutes. For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used: percentages of parents reporting positive or neutral changes for each indicator, means, and distributions of demographic characteristics. No inferential statistical tests were applied, as the aim was an exploratory, descriptive evaluation of key trends in the data. Qualitative data from the trainer interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying the main themes mentioned (e.g., increased cooperation, attention challenges, improved self-confidence) and extracting illustrative quotations for each theme.

Results

FIGURE 1. Percentage of parents reporting improvement in their children's communication, self-confidence, sense of competence, and social relationships after attending the TUMO program. Children with typical and atypical development are represented respectively in orange and blue.



Results from the parent surveys indicate a generally positive impact of the TUMO program on several key aspects of child development, though with some differences between the typical and atypical groups. Communication skills appeared unchanged for most children, but some parents reported improvements. Specifically, approximately 36% of parents of neurotypical children observed that their child became more open and communicative after the program, compared to about 24% of parents in the atypical group who reported such improvement. For the majority of children in both groups (about 64% in the atypical group and 64% in the typical group), communication was rated as “unchanged” following the program—no parent reported deterioration in this area.

Regarding self-confidence, about half of parents in both groups noted an increase in their children’s confidence after attending TUMO. In particular, 48% of parents of children with atypical development reported improved self-confidence, a percentage similar to that of the typical group (56%). The remaining parents in both groups stated that their child’s level of confidence remained the same; no parent reported a decrease in confidence. These findings suggest that overall, about half of the children experienced a boost in self-assurance, while the other half maintained their previous level.

A particularly interesting result emerged concerning the sense of competence—that is, how capable children felt in undertaking new tasks after this experience. Parents of children with atypical development reported more improvement in this area than parents of typically developing children. Specifically, 60% of parents in the atypical group stated that their child now felt more competent and capable in their activities (e.g., acquiring new skills and having the confidence to use them), while 40% did not notice significant change. In contrast, only 32% of parents of neurotypical children reported an increase in their child’s sense of competence, while the majority (68%) noticed no change. This difference suggests that the program may have had a particularly important effect on children with atypical development in terms of self-assessment of abilities—perhaps because these children, who may have initially had lower confidence, had opportunities to experience success and feel capable within a supportive environment.

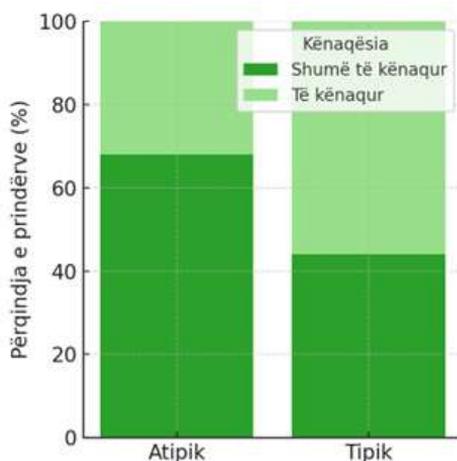
As for social relationships, about 52% of parents in both groups reported that their child became more sociable and cooperative with peers after several months at TUMO. The other half of parents (48% in both groups) did not notice substantial changes in their child’s social behaviors. It is important to note that no parent, in either group, reported a deterioration in social behaviors; children either maintained the same level of social communication or improved somewhat by becoming more open to others.

Regarding children’s initiative—that is, their tendency to take the lead in starting projects or engaging in activities without adult prompting—the data from parents were unanimously positive. Every parent, in both the atypical and

typical groups, reported that their child demonstrated an increase in personal initiative after participating in TUMO. The difference between groups lay only in the degree of this increase: the majority of parents of neurotypical children (64%) stated that their child now takes “much more” initiative than before (e.g., starting new projects or tasks at home independently, exploring new hobbies), while the rest (36%) observed “slightly more” initiative. Among children with atypical development, the picture was similar, though somewhat less pronounced: 52% of parents noted a large increase (“much more”), while 48% saw a modest increase (“slightly more”). No parent in either group reported that their child continued to show the same or less initiative than before—an indication that the program fostered active participation and self-motivation in all children, regardless of developmental status.

Finally, concerning overall child development, parents of the typical group tended to evaluate the program’s impact more positively: 64% believed that TUMO had a positive effect on their child’s development (in terms of new skills, maturity, or life direction), while 36% rated the impact as neutral (neither positive nor negative). Among parents of atypical children, 44% reported a “positive impact” on their child’s development, and 56% “neutral.” No parent in either group described the impact as negative, consistent with the finding that no regressions were observed in any of the evaluated domains.

FIGURE 2. Distribution of parental satisfaction with the TUMO program, by group. Each vertical bar represents one group of parents (left: parents of children with atypical development; right: parents of children with typical development). The dark shade represents the percentage of parents “very satisfied,” while the lighter shade represents those “satisfied.”



The collected data revealed very high levels of parental satisfaction with the TUMO program. No parent from either group expressed dissatisfaction; all were

either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their child’s experience at the center. Among parents of children with atypical development, 68% reported being “very satisfied” with the program, while 32% were “satisfied.” This indicates that more than two-thirds of these parents rated the quality and impact of the program at the highest level. Parents of typically developing children also expressed very positive perceptions, though distributed somewhat differently across the two categories: 44% were “very satisfied” and 56% “satisfied.” Thus, in both cases, 100% of parents expressed satisfaction, with a tendency for parents of children with special needs to be even more enthusiastic (possibly because improvements in their children were particularly meaningful, as mentioned earlier). Furthermore, all parents without exception—both those of atypical and typical children—stated that they would recommend the TUMO program to other parents. This result clearly demonstrates the universally positive perception of participating families regarding the value of the program.

Beyond the quantitative evaluations, results from trainer interviews provided highly meaningful qualitative insights into how the learning process unfolds at TUMO and its impact on students. Trainers generally confirmed that most children, when first starting the program, were curious but somewhat withdrawn. “In the first months, many students are quiet and reserved; they are curious, but often hesitant to take initiative,” observed one trainer (Trainer 1). This aligns with expectations, given that a new environment and unfamiliar methodology require an adjustment period. However, noticeable changes emerged over time. According to trainers, after several months, students began to shed initial insecurities and engage more actively with one another. “Absolutely! After the first months, groups become more connected and cooperative. Even the more withdrawn children participate more naturally,” emphasized another trainer (Trainer 2). This growth in collaboration was consistently mentioned: while many children initially preferred working individually, over time they began sharing ideas, seeking help from peers, and collaborating more effectively in groups.

Trainers noted differences in learning pace between typically developing and atypically developing children, but emphasized that each group had its own strengths. “Students with typical development often complete routine tasks more quickly,” explained one instructor, “whereas children with ASD or ADHD sometimes follow the steps in very detailed ways, which slows them down, but the results they produce are very high-quality” (Trainer 2). This observation was echoed by others, who highlighted that children with atypical development, when they find a topic or project they are passionate about, work with remarkable focus and often produce highly creative solutions. “The quality of work of children with ASD is very high in detail,” said a trainer with three years of experience (Trainer 3), illustrating why it is important to provide these children with space and time to excel at their own pace. On the other hand, typically developing children, though

quicker with tasks, benefit from this diversity of rhythms, as they learn patience and cooperation with peers who have different working styles. This inclusive dynamic seems to teach all children to value diverse contributions within the group.

A central theme emerging from the interviews was the growth of self-initiative and intrinsic motivation among students after spending time in the program. “After 4–6 months, many students, even those who were initially passive, begin to take initiative in their projects,” stated one trainer (Trainer 1). Another illustrated this with an example: “After a few months, some children request to create projects outside the regular program” (Trainer 2), showing that once passion is ignited, students continue exploring even in their free time. According to trainers, TUMO’s self-learning platform allows each child to follow their own pace and interests during lab hours, while workshops and group projects foster collective enthusiasm and push children out of their “individual shells.” “During self-learning they are quieter and more introspective, while in workshops they show more energy, especially when working in groups,” explained one instructor (Trainer 1). This interplay between individual and group phases appears to help children develop a balance between independence and collaboration.

Trainers also reported social, emotional, and cognitive improvements among children—particularly those with atypical development—during their time at TUMO. According to one trainer: “I have seen great improvement in self-confidence and social skills. They learn to express their ideas” (Trainer 1), describing how children with difficulties gradually became more outspoken and confident. Another emphasized: “Much more tolerance for differences and a greater capacity to ask for help” (Trainer 2) as two key changes among some students with autism. This suggests that a flexible environment such as TUMO helped these children adapt better to change and feel comfortable seeking support when facing challenges, rather than withdrawing. Trainers observed that, over time, children with atypical development began expressing themselves more freely and integrating more naturally into groups. “Self-expression improves significantly. They speak more openly about their ideas and feel more empowered,” said the trainer with three years of experience (Trainer 3), highlighting that even children who initially seemed very withdrawn eventually found their voice.

These improvements did not come without challenges: some trainers mentioned the difficulty of maintaining sustained attention among certain students with ADHD or the need to adapt teaching approaches to different learning styles within the same group (e.g., some children require more structured guidance, others prefer greater creative freedom). “Sometimes it is a challenge to keep their attention for long periods or adapt to their different learning styles,” admitted one trainer (Trainer 1). Nonetheless, TUMO staff emphasized that they addressed these challenges by allowing children to work on topics they were truly passionate

about and by providing individualized support when necessary, without restricting creativity.

In summary, trainers unanimously agreed that TUMO's alternative approach has a very positive impact on adolescents' personal development. "I think it has a deeply positive influence. Children learn to be more independent, more creative," said one of them (Trainer 1) when asked to assess the TUMO methods overall. Another noted that the program "uniquely supports the development of mental flexibility and creativity" (Trainer 2), while a trainer with more than three years of experience said that the methods are "extremely effective in fostering a positive relationship with learning" (Trainer 3). These opinions align with the parental enthusiasm observed in the surveys. To illustrate the impact on an individual level, trainers provided concrete examples from their work: one described "a boy with ADHD who at first could barely complete a simple project; now he creates small applications and explains the process with passion" (Trainer 2). Another mentioned "a student who previously avoided group work, [who] now is the first to offer help to peers" (Trainer 4). Another case was "a very shy boy at the beginning, [who] after eight months led a group project to create a video game" (Trainer 3). These success stories reflect the transformative potential of a supportive learning environment: children who initially hesitated later assumed leadership roles; children who struggled with concentration discovered their passion and excelled.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly show that participation in the alternative educational program TUMO is linked to positive developments across several dimensions for adolescents, both those with typical development and those with atypical development. These findings align with existing literature on the benefits of experiential and inclusive learning. The observed increase in initiative among all students after several months in the program reflects what Larson (2000) describes as the outcome of engaging in activities that young people perceive as meaningful and under their own control. The fact that many parents reported improvements in self-confidence and competence in their children, particularly among those with atypical development, is highly significant in the context of adolescents' psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968) and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). According to Erikson, adolescents need to feel successful and competent to navigate the process of identity formation; the TUMO program seems to have provided them with a stage to test themselves and gain that sense of capability. Meanwhile, the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) – the individual's belief in their ability to organize and execute the actions required to achieve goals – is reinforced when young people see they can succeed in new

and challenging tasks. The reported improvements in the sense of competence suggest precisely a growth in self-efficacy, which may lead to multiple positive effects in the future (e.g., greater readiness to engage in academic or professional challenges).

From the perspective of learning theories, the successes observed in children at TUMO can be explained by the combination of optimal learning conditions that the program provides. Both the constructivist and socio-cultural approaches are evident: children learn by actively experimenting with technological and artistic projects and by interacting with mentors and peers. This structure reflects the key ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky, who respectively emphasize the role of active learning and social collaboration in development (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). In light of these theories, it is unsurprising that children at TUMO not only gained technical skills but also became more sociable and cooperative: when children work hands-on and learn by doing, knowledge takes on personal meaning and enthusiasm for learning grows (Papert, 1980; Resnick, 2017). Likewise, the mentoring and support that TUMO trainers offered each student – as seen in their comments on adapting to individual needs – created a zone of proximal development where children could overcome difficulties with minimal help and achieve results they would not have reached on their own (Vygotsky, 1978). This may explain why even children with previous challenges (e.g., in focus or communication) were able to carry out complex projects and successfully present their ideas.

Another key factor is intrinsic motivation. The TUMO approach – giving students autonomy in choosing courses/activities and the chance to follow their passions (such as programming, animation, robotics, or music) – likely fulfilled their needs for autonomy and competence, which, as self-determination theory predicts, enhances intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The increase in self-initiative among students, observed by both parents and trainers, is a clear indicator of intrinsic motivation: children began to undertake projects not because someone asked them to, but because they wanted to do so. This situation fulfills the conditions that Deci and Ryan consider ideal for motivation: children felt like authors of their own learning, they felt competent as they acquired new skills, and they interacted with others in a supportive community (trainers and peers) – the three components that drive intrinsic motivation according to this theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, the high satisfaction of parents and their eagerness to recommend the program indicates that even from the external (family) perspective, this approach is seen as valuable and meaningful for the child, which likely strengthens the adolescents' motivation to continue.

When comparing groups of typically and atypically developing children, we find both similarities and interesting differences. Both groups benefited in significant ways, and there was no indicator where children with atypical development experienced regression or worsening – a concern sometimes raised by skeptics of

inclusive education. On the other hand, we observed that neurotypical children showed somewhat more improvements in communication skills, and their parents more often perceived an overall positive developmental impact, compared to the atypical group where changes were more frequently reported as “neutral.” This may be related to the fact that typical children found it easier to benefit quickly from a rich social environment and may have had more visible room for growth in their parents’ eyes (e.g., a typical child who was already sociable became even more communicative at TUMO, which is immediately noticeable). Meanwhile, children with special needs may have faced more complex challenges in communication that cannot be fully addressed in just a few months, so parents may have reported “neutral” when changes were minor. Literature shows that children with autism, for instance, may require ongoing and specialized interventions for social development, beyond a general program (Koegel et al., 2012). Thus, our finding that only half of parents of atypically developing children observed improvements in socialization may reflect the gradual nature of their progress – progress that may require longer observation periods to become clear.

On the positive side, emotional and motivational aspects showed particularly pronounced benefits for adolescents with atypical development. The increase in competence and self-confidence reported among the majority of these students suggests that the program functioned as a “safe success zone,” where they could excel in specific domains (e.g., technology or art) and demonstrate their abilities both to themselves and to others. This aligns with Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), which posits that a child who may not thrive within a traditional curriculum primarily focused on verbal and logical-mathematical skills can display remarkable talent in other domains (such as visual-spatial skills, musicality, or computational logic). By offering a wide range of fields, the TUMO program enables atypical students to engage with areas where they have talent or interest. For a child with social difficulties, for instance, discovering proficiency in animation or robotics may transform self-perceptions—from feeling “inadequate” in the school context to feeling “capable” in a specific field—leading to a measurable increase in self-esteem. These mechanisms may help explain why parents of atypical children were among the most enthusiastic about the program and its impact.

Another relevant aspect is the reciprocal benefit of inclusive environments, which emerged from trainer comments and parental evaluations. Our data did not reveal any negative effects on typically developing students arising from the presence of atypical peers. On the contrary, typical students experienced improvements equal to, or in some cases greater than, those of atypical students. This finding aligns with previous studies (Baker et al., 1995; Staub & Peck, 1995), which demonstrate that inclusion does not harm the outcomes of typical learners. Trainers further observed that typical students developed increased tolerance

and understanding by learning to collaborate with peers who had different needs. Although this aspect was not directly measured, such “invisible” benefits are consistent with the literature on inclusive education: when successfully implemented, inclusive classrooms frequently foster mentoring skills, patience, and heightened empathy among typical students (Staub & Peck, 1995). From an educational policy perspective, these findings highlight the broader societal value of initiatives such as TUMO, which aim to be inclusive. A society benefits when children are taught from an early age to coexist and collaborate within diverse contexts.

Despite the encouraging results, certain limitations of this study and their implications warrant discussion. First, the absence of a control group of adolescents not enrolled in the TUMO program means that, although reported improvements are substantial, we cannot conclude with absolute certainty that they are attributable solely to the program. Some changes—particularly in self-confidence or communication—may also partly reflect natural maturation during adolescence. Nevertheless, the specific nature of the changes (e.g., immediate increases in initiative or newly developed interests in technology) and the fact that parents explicitly attributed these developments to TUMO strengthen the case for the program’s central role. Another limitation is that assessments relied on the perceptions of parents and trainers, which may contain elements of subjectivity or enthusiasm bias. For example, highly satisfied parents might have been more inclined to notice positive changes. Although interviews with trainers and parents’ open-ended responses offered consistency and illustrative examples supporting the validity of the reported improvements, future research would benefit from incorporating more objective measures (e.g., standardized assessments of social skills pre- and post-program, or comparisons with matched groups of adolescents not attending TUMO). Moreover, the timeframe considered (typically 6–12 months) allows for discussion of short- to medium-term effects, but the long-term sustainability of these changes remains unknown. Following the same group of adolescents over one or two years would be valuable to determine whether, for instance, self-confidence gained at TUMO translates into success in other domains such as school performance or peer relationships outside the program.

In sum, this study provides clear evidence that an alternative learning environment enriched with technology, creativity, and inclusivity can be highly beneficial for adolescents. The documented benefits—ranging from increased digital competencies to enhanced social skills and motivation—are aligned with contemporary educational priorities aimed at equipping young people with 21st-century skills (e.g., creativity, collaboration, problem-solving) and fostering a positive attitude toward lifelong learning. The TUMO program appears to meet these objectives through a methodology that is engaging and student-driven, an element often difficult to replicate in formal education systems. Furthermore, its

success with a heterogeneous group of students, including those with ASD and ADHD, reinforces the argument that individualized and flexible instruction, combined with high expectations for all, can help narrow learning experience gaps between students of different abilities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that the alternative educational program TUMO has a positive and multidimensional impact on adolescent development—both for typically developing youth and those with atypical development. Improvements were observed in social skills (communication and collaboration), emotional capacities (self-confidence and sense of competence), and motivation (self-initiative) following participation in the program. Parents reported high levels of satisfaction and shared personal success stories, while trainers confirmed the observed positive changes and provided concrete examples of student transformation. No negative effects were reported from the mixing of groups; on the contrary, the inclusive environment proved valuable for all participants. These results strongly support educational theories that emphasize active, differentiated, and social learning, and they demonstrate that alternative methods can effectively complement formal education.

Based on these findings, several practical and research-oriented recommendations emerge:

- **Expansion of similar programs:** Educational institutions and community centers should consider developing or extending alternative programs such as TUMO, which allow young people to pursue their passions in technology, art, and other creative fields. Participation should be particularly encouraged for students who show low motivation in traditional curricula or who have special educational needs, as the potential benefits are significant.
- **Integration of effective practices into public schools:** Lessons drawn from TUMO's methodology—such as project-based learning, technology use, and individualized approaches—can be gradually incorporated into regular school curricula. This could include the introduction of project modules, after-school clubs mentored by teachers, or innovation labs within schools where students work on projects similar to those at TUMO.
- **Teacher and trainer preparation:** Investment in teacher training for inclusive and student-centered pedagogies is recommended. As this study showed, the role of the trainer is critical to student motivation and success; trainers must be flexible, supportive, and able to adapt to diverse learning styles. Teacher education programs could include modules on special

education and educational technology to better equip future educators to support diverse classrooms with innovative methods.

- **Parental engagement:** Since parents are essential partners in child development, programs such as TUMO should continue to communicate regularly with parents about their child's progress and provide guidance on how to reinforce that progress at home. For example, if a child develops a new interest in robotics, parents might be encouraged to support this interest through complementary activities at home or within the community.
- **Further research:** Future studies employing more rigorous designs—such as comparisons with control groups of children not attending TUMO or attending alternative programs—would be valuable to confirm the magnitude of TUMO's impact and to examine the durability of its benefits. Longitudinal research following students after completing the program could shed light on long-term outcomes in academic success and social development. Additionally, further qualitative research could provide deeper insight into the individual experiences of adolescents with atypical development in such environments, identifying the specific factors that support their progress most effectively (e.g., one-to-one mentoring, structured versus flexible learning conditions).

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Annexes

Annex 1.1: QUESTIONNAIRE – PARENTS

Section A: Basic Information

1. Child's age: _____
2. Gender: Male Female Other
3. Does the child have a developmental diagnosis? Yes (please specify: _____) No
4. Duration of attendance at TUMO:
 - o Less than 6 months
 - o 6–12 months
 - o More than 12 months

Section B: Behavior prior to attending TUMO

5. Before attending TUMO, how would you describe your child's level of social communication?
 - Very withdrawn
 - Moderately communicative
 - Very sociable
6. Before attending TUMO, how would you describe your child's level of self-confidence?
 - o Very insecure
 - o Moderately confident
 - o Very confident
7. How often did your child engage in creative or technological activities during free time?
 - o Very rarely
 - o Occasionally
 - o Very often

Section C: Observed changes after attending TUMO

8. After attending TUMO, how has your child's social communication changed?
 - Worsened

- Remained the same
 - Improved
9. After attending TUMO, how has your child's self-confidence changed?
- o Decreased
 - o Remained the same
 - o Increased
10. Your child now demonstrates more:
- Initiative to participate in activities
 - Interest in technology or art
 - Self-motivation to pursue personal projects
11. How would you evaluate TUMO's impact on your child's overall development?
- Negative
 - Neutral
 - Positive
12. What concrete changes have you observed in your child's behavior or attitudes? (Open-ended)

Section D: Overall Satisfaction

13. How satisfied are you with your child's experience at TUMO?
- Very dissatisfied
 - Dissatisfied
 - Neutral
 - Satisfied
 - Very satisfied
14. Would you recommend participation in TUMO to other children?
- Yes
 - No

Section E: Sense of competence, autonomy, and social connectedness

15. After participating in TUMO, do you believe your child feels more competent to complete technological or artistic projects?
- Yes
 - No
 - No noticeable change
16. Do you observe that your child now takes more personal initiative (e.g., starting projects, solving problems without adult help)?
- Yes, much more
 - Slightly more
 - No change
 - Less than before



17. How would you describe your child's social relationships with peers after the TUMO experience?

- More isolated
- No change
- More open and cooperative

18. Do you believe that the TUMO experience helped your child feel:

(You may select more than one)

- That they have valuable skills and competencies
- That they can make independent decisions about their learning path
- That they belong to a welcoming community
- None of the above

19. If you wish, please share an example where your child demonstrated growth in self-confidence, autonomy, or social relationships after participating in TUMO:

Annex 1.2: INTERVIEW – TRAINERS

Basic Information

1. How long have you been working at TUMO?
2. In which fields do you teach or mentor (e.g., programming, animation, etc.)?

Observations of student behavior

3. When a child first begins attending TUMO, what behaviors do you typically observe during the initial months?
4. Do you notice visible changes in how students collaborate with others over the course of the year? Can you provide examples?

Progress in learning

5. Are there differences in the pace at which students with typical and atypical development complete activities? How are these differences expressed?
6. Do you observe an increase in self-initiative (intrinsic motivation) among students after several months of attendance?
7. How does their engagement differ between the self-learning phase and the workshop/project phase?

Reflections on psychoeducational benefits

8. For children with atypical development (e.g., ASD, ADHD), what social, emotional, or cognitive improvements have you most frequently observed?
9. What challenges do you face in supporting these students during the learning process?
10. Overall, how do you think TUMO's alternative methods influence adolescent personal development?

11. In your experience, have you observed that TUMO students develop greater awareness of their technical or creative competencies? Can you provide examples?
12. Do you find that, after several months at TUMO, students take more personal initiative for the projects they pursue?
13. How does the TUMO learning environment influence students' sense of belonging and collaboration? Have you seen cases where more reserved students integrated socially through activities?
14. In what ways do you believe TUMO contributes to adolescents' intrinsic motivation to learn and create?

Challenges faced by teaching assistants while supporting an 8-year-old child with Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and Attention/Deficit Disorder (ADHD) in inclusive primary education _____

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Abstract

Inclusive education in Albania is in the process of development, especially when dealing with children with overlapping developmental disorders such as Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This article has the main focus on the challenges that an assistant teacher has to face on a daily basis while working with an 8-year-old child who is diagnosed with SCD and ADHD in an inclusive private elementary school. Based on real-world experience and insight from existing research, this article explores five challenges: (1) difficulties in communication and social interaction, (2) the management of attention and behavior issues, (3) working effectively with teachers, (4) adjusting teaching methods and the literature to meet each child's needs, and (5) coping with professional stress and emotional burnout that the assistant teacher has to go through. The findings reflect broader systemic issues such as lack of training, unclear

definition of the role of the teaching assistant, and limited institutional support. The article also discusses cultural challenges specific to Albania, where inclusion is still in the process of being structured. This paper recommends introducing formal training programs, strengthening collaboration among educators and other stakeholders, and developing clear policy guidelines to better support teaching assistants in their roles. By highlighting the daily challenges and broader system gaps, it adds valuable insight to the ongoing conversation about effective inclusive practices for children with diverse developmental needs.

Keywords: *teaching assistant, social communication disorder, ADHD, inclusive education, Albania, classroom support, behavioral intervention*

Introduction

Inclusive education is now a priority for education systems worldwide, emphasizing the importance of including children with disabilities in general classrooms. In Albania, this type of effort is still developing, especially for children who have overlapping neurodevelopmental conditions like the child mentioned in this paper, who is diagnosed with Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). According to the *American Psychiatric Association* (2013), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most prevalent mental disorders among children. The symptoms of ADHD include impulsivity (hasty, unplanned actions), hyperactivity (excessive movement inappropriate for the situation), and inattention (difficulty maintaining focus). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5) introduced Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder (SCD) as a distinct diagnosis to better identify individuals who experience persistent difficulties in the social use of verbal and nonverbal communication. According to the *American Psychiatric Association* (2013), these challenges can significantly interfere with an individual's ability to communicate effectively, participate in social interactions, build and maintain relationships, and succeed academically or occupationally. This diagnosis highlights the importance of recognizing communication difficulties that do not stem from structural language deficits or autism spectrum disorder but nonetheless have a substantial impact on daily functioning. These students often need personalized support that many mainstream teachers are not yet fully prepared to deliver. Teaching assistants – support professionals who work one-on-one with children in mainstream settings – have become an essential but understudied element of the inclusive model. This article has the main focus on the challenges that an assistant teacher has to face on a daily basis while working with an 8-year-old child who is diagnosed with SCD and ADHD in an inclusive

private elementary school. The case provides a practical view of barriers to behavior, learning, and collaboration within the classroom.

The aim of the paper is to contribute knowledge to the broader discourse on educational inclusion, especially in contexts like Albania, where the system still does not provide clear structures and training for assistant teachers.

Theoretical Background: Social Communication Disorder (SCD) and attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), Social Communication Disorder (SCD) involves ongoing difficulties in using verbal and nonverbal communication in social settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This can make it hard for a child to engage in conversations, interact appropriately with others, and adjust their communication to fit different situations. On the other hand, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is marked by problems with attention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity challenges that can greatly affect a child's ability to learn and behave effectively in the classroom. When these two disorders co-exist, the child's educational needs become very complex, requiring behaviorally focused interventions and ongoing one-on-one individualized support throughout the school day.

Methodological Approach

Context and participant

The study was conducted in an elementary private school in Albania where the inclusive education model is implemented. The child was included in a class with his peers, receiving permanent support from the assistant teacher – the author of this article – who at the same time also had the role of the child's therapist. The intervention and supervision were carried out over the course of one school year.

Child profile:

- Age: 8 years old
- Diagnosis: Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder and ADHD
- Difficulties: Social interaction, problematic behavior, difficulties concentrating during a task, pragmatic communication, and academic performance.

Concrete data collection model

To collect qualitative data systematically, five main instruments were used:

Used instrument	Purpose	Frequency of use
Daily records (diary notes)	Documenting behaviors and interactions	For every school day
Reflective notes in the field	Personal analysis and reactions to classroom situations	2–3 times a week
Informal teacher evaluations	Discussions on progress and challenges	Once a week
Child's work	Assessment of academic progress and concentration	Every week
Behavior charts (tracking)	Measuring the frequency and intensity of behaviors	For each incident/day

Behavior Tracking Chart

Date	Observed behavior	Frequency	Intensity (1-5)	Circumstances prior to the behavior	Interference	Result after intervention
18/10/2024	Pushed a classmate	3	3	Game during lunch break	Verbal interference and withdrawal from friend	Apologized
23/10/2024	Harsh language towards classmates	4	4	During P.E.	Verbal interference	He apologized and continued the game clearly
24/10/2024	Tore up the reading book	2	4	Next in turn to read	Taking the book out of his hand and verbally intervening	Tried to paste it and read the part

The Role of the Teaching Assistant/Therapist in Supporting Students with Social Communication Disorder and ADHD

The chart below presents the multidimensional role of the teacher assistant (also therapist) in the context of inclusive education.

- Teacher Assistant / Therapist
- Academic support

- Adaptation of teaching materials
- Assistance in concentration and organization of tasks
- Behavioral intervention
- Observation and functional analysis of behavior
- Applying strategies to help children manage their emotions and behaviors on their own.
- Using positive reinforcement and effective crisis management techniques to maintain a supportive and accepting environment.
- Integrating individual students' needs into the classroom setting.
- Incorporating visual ways to support understanding and communication.
- Establishing clear routines and smooth transitions to create consistency and reduce anxious situations.
- Finding solutions to provide social and emotional support through positive interactions.
- Encouraging relationships between classmates and fostering inclusive play and collaboration.
- Managing conflicts or misunderstandings between classmates to promote healthy communication.
- Collaborating closely with the staff of the school to ensure coordinated support.
- Engaging in daily reflection and documentation to monitor progress and improve the methods of practice.
- Daily reflection and documentation

Analytical approach and thematic analysis

Using a thematic analysis approach, the required data were examined to uncover important themes related to the assistant teacher's experiences and the child's responses to various interventions. The process included several steps:

- Repeatedly reviewing the data to gain a deep understanding of the content.
- Highlighting and operationalizing important elements, such as identifying situations that trigger challenging and problematic behaviors and the strategies used to manage them.
- Organizing codes into broader themes that captured recurring patterns and insights.
- Reviewing and refining these themes in light of existing literature to ensure accuracy and relevance.

Main themes identified

Subject	Description	Example from practice
Challenging interaction with peers	The child exhibited withdrawn behavior, verbal aggression, or lack of initiative	Refused to cooperate on pair tasks
Difficulty concentrating on academic tasks	Constant interruptions of activity, distraction, frequent movements	Left the table several times in an hour of reading
The need for task adaptation	Tasks should be shorter and with clear separation of steps	A 5-step task simplified into two separate steps
The multidimensional role of the teaching assistant	Support in organization, motivation, interaction and behavioral assessment	Visual cards were used for structure and motivation

Conclusion of the methodological part

The reflective approach and thematic analysis revealed that the role of the assistant teacher is very important not only in providing practical assistance to the child, but also as a bridge of cooperation with the classroom teacher and as a key element in the implementation of personalized interventions. The challenges mentioned – such as managing behavior, adapting materials, and building social relationships – need specialised professional preparation and institutional support.

Ethical considerations

All observations were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of confidentiality, consent, and the best interests of the child. The case mentioned is anonymous and all identifying information has been removed to secure privacy.

Challenges facing assistant teachers

Communication Barriers

Children with SCD face difficulties managing social cues, initiating interactions with peers, and understanding the pragmatic aspects of language. The assistant teacher must constantly manage the interactions between the child and others, often without formal training.

Behavioral and Attention Difficulties

The symptoms of ADHD required constant redirection, behavior management strategies, and positive reinforcement to prevent behavior escalation. This consumed a significant portion of the assistant teacher's attention and often relegated academic support to the back burner.

Collaboration with Classroom Teachers

Assistant teachers are mainly perceived more as external helpers rather than as an integrated part of the educational team. In this case, the lack of co-planning and clear communication with the classroom teacher created inconsistencies in the provision of instruction.

Instructional Adaptations

Modifying tasks to match the cognitive and behavioral level of the child was essential, however, the necessary human and material resources were not provided. The assistant teacher had to rely on his or her own efforts to make decisions in real time.

Emotional stress and professional 'burnout'

The intensity of individual support, together with highly volatile expectations and the lack of institutional support, contributed to emotional exhaustion. This is a recurring theme in the literature on support workers in education (Giangreco et al., 2011).

Discussion

The challenges described are consistent with findings in the international literature on the marginalization of teaching assistants and the lack of sufficient training on neurodevelopmental disorders (Broer et al., 2005; Butt, 2016). In Albania, these issues are compounded by the fact that inclusion is still in the early stages of formal implementation. Teaching assistants often operate without job security, professional supervision, and access to continuing professional development – making it difficult to provide effective and sustainable support.

Recommendations

1. Formal Training Programs – Creation of certified courses for teaching assistants with a focus on autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, and behavior management strategies.
2. Collaboration Protocols – Mandatory collaborative planning between all classroom and teaching assistants.
3. Emotional and Professional Support – Creation of structures for supervision, mentoring, and support groups for teaching assistants.

Conclusion

Teaching assistants play a very important part in supporting children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, but their contribution often remains unvalued and unformalized (Government consultation on the SEND and alternative provision system in England : March 2022). This article that is based on practical experience of the author and the cited literature, highlights the urgent need for change in reforms of the Albanian education system. By addressing the challenges experienced by these professionals, educational institutions can better serve both their staff and the children they support.

The revision acknowledges the study's limited generalizability but stresses its importance as a foundation for further research and professional development.

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*Managing Challenging Behaviors in a
Preschool Boy with Advanced Verbal
Skills through ABA Therapy.
A Case Study of Educator Lack
of Understanding and Behavior
Reduction Strategies* _____

_____ *Dr. Migen SULAJ* _____

_____ *Msc. Raina BABARAMO* _____

Abstract

This case study explores the implementation and outcomes of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy in the management of challenging behaviors in a five-year-old boy attending preschool. Although the child possesses very good verbal skills that are beyond his age, he exhibits challenging behaviors with high frequency and intensity, including disobedience, aggression, destruction of materials, victimization, attention seeking, rejection, and difficulty engaging in social play. These behaviors significantly affected his involvement in learning and peer relationships. Classroom educators expressed difficulty and uncertainty in how to manage these behaviors, often using ineffective strategies due to a lack of training in behavior-based interventions. The child was treated with individual ABA therapy by the psychologist who is also the child's therapist, for one hour per day, four times a week, at the KODDI Center. He also participated in group ABA therapy once a week for 90 minutes to improve social skills. Continuous collaboration with educators was carried out through data

collection and information exchange. Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) showed that the problematic behaviors had a function to get attention, avoid demands and have access to preferred objects. Based on the FBA, a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) was developed and then implemented in the clinic and at school. A companion was recommended for the child at preschool.

The results showed a significant reduction in problematic behaviors, improved acceptance and increased social interactions. The study emphasizes the essential role of ABA in understanding the function of behavior, the importance of interprofessional collaboration and the need for training of educators in inclusive preschool education.

Keywords: ABA Therapy, preeschool, Challenging Behavior, assistant teacher, verbal skills, inclusive education.

Introduction

The management of challenging behaviors in preschool education is still one of the greatest challenges for educators and professionals working with children with atypical development. In Albania, there is a lack of systematic and professional training for preschool teachers in functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and behavioral analysis-based interventions (ABA), meanwhile international literature emphasizes the importance of these two components for the inclusion and well-being of children in school settings (Horner et al., 2005; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). In the Albanian reality, children who exhibit difficult behaviors are often negatively labeled (“unruly”, “aggressive”, “problem”), which has consequences for their social and academic development. Educators are not trained to understand the functions of behavior and use punitive or avoidance strategies, which usually worsen the situation. Children in inclusive preschool classes who exhibit challenging behaviors often face barriers in effectively participating in social and learning activities. When these behaviors come along with advanced verbal skills, teachers might find it difficult to understand what the child truly needs. They may think that the child is more emotionally mature than they actually are and it might lead to them expecting a level of self-control that’s beyond the child’s stage of development (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). Without professional training in behavior analysis, educators can often respond in ways that unintentionally reinforce a problematic behavior (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2020). This situation makes it necessary to develop interdisciplinary approaches and targeted trainings for behavior management in the school and family context. In this context, this case study aims to provide a concrete example of the application of ABA principles in an Albanian preschool environment, to present a model of the structure of the FBA and the Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), and

to highlight the importance of involving educators and parents for sustainable and effective support.

Methodology

This is a qualitative case study, based on direct intervention with a 5-year-old child, with advanced language development but with pronounced challenging behaviors, included in a preschool environment for a 3-month period (January–April 2025).

Participant

“T” is a five-year-old boy enrolled in a private preschool class of 12 children. He displayed advanced language skills, but had significant difficulties with remaining emotionally stable and social interaction. The most common behaviors included yelling, physical aggression, disobedience, destruction of materials, and difficulty playing with others. “T” did not have a formal diagnosis at the time of the intervention, but parents and educators described behaviors consistent with disorders such as ADHD and social communication disorders.

The educators collaborated to collect data using standardized instruments and to implement the behavioral intervention designed by the KODDI Development Center according to standard data-based methods.

Intervention

At first, the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) process was developed, which lasted 3 weeks and included data collection from three settings: classroom, clinic, and home. The FBA was then used to identify the main functions of problem behaviors (task avoidance, attention seeking, and object approach).

Based on the results of the FBA, a Behavior Intervention Plan was created, which included:

- Proactive strategies: Setting up the space, employing visual aids, alerting people to changes, and preparing emotionally.
- Instructing alternative functioning behaviors: such as asking for help or using clear words to avoid outbursts (through modeling, prompts, and positive reinforcement).
- Crisis management: de-escalation strategies (calm approach, avoiding intense contact, guiding to a quiet space).
- Training educators and parents

The child received individual ABA therapy 5 times a week from the psychologist who was also his therapist. He also participated in group therapy once a week. A structured collaboration model with educators was also applied, through direct instructions and monitoring of the implementation of the intervention in the classroom.

For the successful implementation of the plan, two training sessions (180 minutes each) were held with educators and parents:

- Session 1: Basic principles of ABA, behavioral functions and the importance of objective observation.
- Session 2: The role of the educator/parent in the implementation of the plan, the use of reinforcers, modeling and practical scenarios (role play). Participants received written materials and practical guidelines for implementation. In addition, an experienced ABA aide was included in the classroom 5 days a week throughout the intervention period to support the educators and ensure consistency in implementation (Lequia, Machalicek, & Rispoli, 2012).

Methodology Tools

A range of tools designed to document child behavior and intervention effectiveness were used to collect and analyze data in this study. The tools that were selected were based on scientifically proven practices in the fields of behavior analysis and inclusive education.

Daily Behavior Observation Forms (Annex 1)

A range of tools designed to document child behavior and intervention effectiveness were used to collect and analyze data in this study. These tools were selected based on scientifically proven practices in the fields of behavior analysis and inclusive education.

Checklist for targeted behaviors (Annex 2)

The therapist used a standard checklist to monitor the targeted behaviors during the ABA intervention, such as: initiating verbal communication, using language to ask for help, following rules, and respecting boundaries during play. Assessment was done systematically during individual sessions and group activities, according to the principles of behavior-based assessment (Leaf et al., 2016).

Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) (Annex 3)

It was conducted through the basic behavioral assessment instrument by collecting information from educators and parents during direct classroom observations. Classroom educators contributed daily observations and completed short behavioral assessment forms. The goal was to identify the function of challenging behaviors, such as task avoidance, attention seeking, or accessing preferred stimuli. This process was based on functional behavioral assessment protocols recommended by the literature (O'Neill et al., 2015).

The VFS showed that T.'s behaviors occurred for:

- Attention seeking (e.g., yelling during teacher instructions),
- Task avoidance (e.g., refusing during structured activities),
- Accessing preferred objects (e.g., aggression toward peers while playing with toys).

Behavior intervention plan (BIP)

Based on the results of the VFS, a personalized intervention plan was developed that included: positive reinforcement and a differential reinforcement of alternative behavior (DRA), the use of a token reward system, and functional communication training (FCT). The plan was implemented jointly by the ABA therapist, educators, and teaching assistant (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007).

Daily behavior tracking sheets

Educators completed a daily behaviour tracking sheet that included:

- The frequency of the problematic behaviours (e.g., yelling, aggression, disobedience),
- Measuring the intensity on a 3-point scale (mild, moderate, severe),
- Contextual variables (activity, time, location),
- Notes on antecedents and responses.

These sheets allowed for continuous data collection and provided immediate feedback to the therapist and teaching assistant.

Tool for monitoring progress in social skills (Annex 4)

A therapist-developed checklist, based on the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS), was used to assess weekly:

- Initiating and maintaining play with peers,
- Sharing and waiting in line,
- Following group instructions,
- Emotional self-regulation strategies.

This tool helped track social progress and generalization of skills from therapy to the classroom.

Weekly reflections and comments from educators

The therapist and educators kept regular weekly logs to exchange information on the implementation of the intervention, difficulties encountered, and necessary adjustments. This method helped maintain a coordinated interdisciplinary approach, consistent with guidelines for comprehensive practice (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Educators kept a weekly reflection journal to:

- Record observations of changes in behavior,
- Express perceptions of the impact of the intervention,
- Describe difficulties in implementing strategies,
- Suggest adjustments in collaboration with the therapist.

These journals facilitated ongoing collaboration and triangulation of qualitative data.

Results

After three months of intervention:

- Interruptive yelling was reduced from 8 episodes per hour to 2 per hour.
- Physical aggression decreased from 4–5 times per day to less than 1 time.
- Disobedience during structured activities was reduced by more than 60%.
- Spontaneous initiation of social play increased significantly.
- Functional communication increased from 20% to 75% of opportunities.

Educators reported improvement in understanding and managing behavior. The presence of the teacher assistant brought calm and predictability to the child in the classroom environment

This study highlights the importance of a structured and comprehensive approach to the management of challenging behaviors. In a reality like Albania, where scientific approaches to behavior management are not yet integrated into the training that is needed and the professional development of teachers, the benefits of evidence-based interventions are evident.

The study highlights the urgent need to develop detailed training modules in ABA and behavior management for preschool educators, as well as to create sustainable support programs for parents. Implementing a plan based on functional behavior analysis significantly improves behavior and helps the child interact more positively with the environment.

Educators who receive training in ABA feel more confident and better prepared to face challenging situations in the classroom. Parents who are included in the intervention plan report a decrease in problematic behaviors at home, favoring the generalization of positive behaviors.

Limitations

This case study focuses on several important limitations related to the Albanian context that affect the effective implementation of ABA therapy and the control of challenging behaviors in inclusive preschool settings.

Firstly, one ongoing issue with identifying and implementing evidence-based interventions is the absence of organized training for educators in the field of applied behaviour analysis (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2020). This often leads to the misunderstanding of children's behaviour and the usage of incorrect or punitive strategies.

Secondly, the youngster had access to a specialised facility and an ABA-trained therapist when the successful intervention was carried out, something that not many Albanian families can afford. This indicates inequality in access and the need to expand public services for children with special needs. Third, the success of the intervention was closely linked to the inclusion of an assistant teacher with ABA training, a position that is currently not very clear in the Albanian public preschool system. This indicates the need to create formal structures for assistant teachers trained in behavior management, mandatory professional training or standardization of working methods, which directly affects the quality of support for children with challenging behaviors or special needs. In this case, the need for a specially trained assistant teacher and for close collaboration with the therapist emerged as a key element for the success of the intervention. as part of

inclusive education policies. Third, the lack of systematic assessment and progress monitoring mechanisms in public schools hinders the early identification of children with challenging behaviors and the timely implementation of appropriate interventions.

Another limitation is the inadequacy of formal early diagnosis and multidisciplinary clinical assessment. In Albania, kids are sometimes tested late, or their parents don't want to get professional treatment because of stigma or because they can't get to the right resources. This phenomenon contributes to the delay in intervention and the further reinforcement of preventable challenging behaviors.

Finally, the lack of detailed ABA training modules in university training programs for preschool educators and the lack of structured cooperation between educational institutions and therapeutic centers constitute another critical gap that needs to be addressed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study provides concrete evidence that the application of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy and combined with a well-structured Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and training for educators and parents, can bring about tangible improvements in the behavior and social functioning of a child with advanced language development but challenging behavior. The limitation of behavioral outbursts, improved social interaction and learning environment, demonstrate the effectiveness of evidence-based interventions even in a resource-poor context such as Albania. The results show that the involvement of educators and parents in all phases of the intervention is an important component for the success that is required and sustainability of behavior changes (Koegel et al., 2014; Lucyshyn et al., 2007). The implementation of FBA and BIP not only helps in behavior management, but also increases the awareness and competence of professionals working with children with special needs. According to Sugai and Simonsen (2012), approaches based on the function of the behavior are more effective than traditional punitive approaches.

However, structural challenges, such as the lack of formal and professional training and the lack of ongoing support, continue to hinder the effective implementation of ABA interventions in Albanian preschool settings.

The study offers the following key recommendations for educational practice and policy:

Develop training modules in ABA for preschool educators, which include topics such as the functions of behavior, the use of positive reinforcement, and de-escalation strategies (Horner et al., 2005).

Integrating functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and BIP into everyday

teaching practices, through interdisciplinary collaboration between psychologists, therapists, and teaching staff.

Involving parents in planning and implementing interventions, to increase the sustainability and generalization of desired behaviors across settings (Lucyshyn et al., 2007).

Creating a sustainable support structure in schools, through the inclusion of ABA-trained teaching assistants to help implement the plan and support educators.

Drafting national policies that require and support the implementation of evidence-based interventions in educational institutions for children with challenging behaviors.

In conclusion, managing challenging behaviors requires more than the will of educators — it requires training, structure, collaboration, and institutional commitment. This study contributes to the Albanian literature with a model of successful practice that can be reproduced and further developed in other preschool education contexts.

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Annex 1

Daily Behavior Observation Sheet

Name: _____

Date: _____

Observer: _____

Setting: School Home Therapeutic Center Else: _____

Target Behavior: _____

Observation Table by Schedule

Time	Activity	Observed Behavior	Behavior Description	Antecedent	Consequence	Intensity (1–5)	Duration
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Behavior Frequency Tracking (Optional)

Target Behavior	Counting	Notes
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ABC Data Collection (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence)

Time	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Notes
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(What happened before the behavior?) (What happened exactly?) (What happened after?)

Other notes /Humor/jokes/Progressobserved

Observer's Signature: _____

Total Observation Time: _____mins

Annex 2

List of targeted behaviors

Based on the description of a 5-year-old child who has verbal skills above his age, but who exhibits challenging behaviors such as: excessive insistence, avoidance, refusal, tantrums, aggression and destructive behavior, as well as difficulties in maintaining social relationships, an adapted list of target behaviors (based on Leaf et al., 2016) has been constructed below, which reflects the child's individual developmental priorities and current needs.

List of Target Behaviors for the 5-year-old Child

Field	Target Behavior	Achieved	In Progress	To be developed
1.Emotional Regulation	Identifies own emotions (e.g., "I am angry")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Uses learned strategies for calming down (e.g.,	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	breathing, rest, visual cards)			
	Follows routines to recover from emotional outbursts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.Functional Behavior	Seeks help or rest instead of rejection/aggression	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Follows instructions without outbursts or avoidance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Interrupts destructive behavior when asked	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.Social Skills	Takes turns in play or conversation with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Follows rules of play with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Expresses positive interest in peers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Understands the reactions of others and adjusts behavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.Pragmatic Communication Skills	Uses appropriate language to resolve conflicts verbally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Follows conversational exchanges in a logical order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Interrupts when asked and listens to the interlocutor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.Cognitive Flexibility	Follows changes in routine without explosive behavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Accepts when an activity is over (without insisting or exploding)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Adapts to new demands in a group setting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.Self-directed behavior	Follows simple daily structures without constant supervision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Identifies inappropriate behavior after an episode

Reflects on the consequences of aggressive behavior



Self-directed behavior:

- Check (✓) the appropriate column based on periodic assessments.
- This list can be used to build personalized goals in an ABA or Individual Educational Plan (IEP).
- Can be integrated with visual strategies, emotion maps, functional communication, and interventions for challenging behaviors.

Annex 3

Individualized Behavior Intervention Plan (IBSP)

Child's name: T.

Age: 5 years old

Plan start date:

Drafted by: Name of KODDI Development Center supervisor

Plan participants: ABA therapist, educators, assistant teacher, parents.

Description of problematic behaviors

Behavior	Description of behavior	Frequency / Context of occurrence
<i>Rejection</i>	Rejects verbal and academic requests, displays avoidance behavior (sitting on the floor, withdrawing into oneself)	During transitions and new tasks
Tantrums	Crying loudly, screaming, hitting self or objects	When a favorite activity is interrupted
Aggressive Behavior	Hitting or kicking, pushing children or adults	Under conditions of frustration or social interference

Insistent Behavior	Constantly asks for an action/game to be repeated; does not accept change	When there is a change in routine or structured activity
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b. Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA)

Suspected functions of the behaviors:

- Avoidance of demands
- Seeking order/structure
- Emotional self-regulation
- Seeking access to preferred activities

Positive behavior goals (target behaviors)

Target Behavior	Description	Duration
Following directions on the first try	Responds to simple requests within 5 seconds without protest	3 months
Using phrases to ask for help or a break	“Help me,” “Can I take a break?” instead of refusal or aggression	2 months
Tracking transitions with the help of a visual calendar	Switches from one activity to another without outbursts	6 weeks
Chooses ways to self-regulate	Uses calming strategy box (breathing, stress ball, coloring) Follows simple game rules and takes turns	2 months
Collaborates in play with a peer for 5 minutes	Uses calming strategy box (breathing, stress ball, coloring) Follows simple game rules and takes turns	3 months

c. Applicable Interventions and Strategies

Proactive Interventions

- Visual daily schedule and clear structuring of transitions
- 1 minute warnings before each activity change
- Establishing positive classroom rules in visual form
- Visual aids for emotional regulation (emotion cards)

Instructional Interventions:

- Functional communication training
- Role-play for social interaction- Emotional expression through painting or cards

Corrective Interventions:

- Ignoring non-threatening behavior
- Use of supervised “Time-In”
- Reviewing behavior after outburst

Reinforcers

Reinforcer Type	Examples	Frequency
Social	Verbal praise, hug, applause	After each target behavior
Concrete	Coloring, playing with favorite toy	5 minutes after goal achievement
Activity	Resting in the quiet corner, listening to music	After completing task

d. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring tools: Daily behavior log, behavior frequency chart, monthly ABA assessments

e. Parental Participation

- Parents will be trained to implement similar strategies at home

- Weekly communication with therapist for updates and consistency
- Guidance provided for use of self-regulation strategies in the family

Annex 4

CHECKLIST – ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

(Based on SSIS – Social Skills Improvement System)

General information:

Child's name: _____

Date of assessment: _____

Evaluator: _____

Evaluation period: _____

Explanation of the rating scale:

Value	Description
0	Never
1	Rarely
2	Sometimes
3	Often
4	Always

I. POSITIVE SOCIAL SKILLS

Nr.	Ability	Description	Evaluation (0–4)
1	Greetings others	Uses “hello”, “goodbye”	___
2	Follows instructions	Responds to requests without objection	___
3	Waits for turn	Respects turn to speak/play	___
4	Follows rules	Does not change the rules of the game	___
5	Shows empathy	Responds to the	___

		feelings of others	
6	Expresses frustration verbally	Instead of physical/verbal aggression	___
7	Collaborates in a group	Participates in a positive manner	___
8	Asks for help appropriately	No yelling or aggression	___
9	Accepts correction	Responds well to “no”	___
10	Manages emotions	Controls outbursts/emotions	___

II. PROBLEMOUS BEHAVIOR

Nr.	Behavior	Description	Evaluation (0–4)
1	Refuses tasks/instructions	Refuses to participate	___
2	Insistent behavior	Rigidly insists	___
3	Aggressive behavior	Hits, pushes, screams	___
4	Avoidance	Withdraws from activity, ignores	___
5	Emotional outbursts	Episodes of crying, screaming, etc.	___
6	Interrupts others	Interferes in communication without turn	___
7	Inappropriate language	Insults, negativity	___
8	Leaving without permission	Leaves place without warning	___
9	Self-harming behavior	(If displayed)	___
10	Verbal manipulation	Uses strategies to avoid	___

III. Additional Comments/Observations

- _____
- _____
- _____

IV. Summary

Skills that have shown improvement:

- _____
- _____

Areas requiring further intervention:

- _____
- _____

Next assessment date: _____



Sexual Behaviors in Children with Autism Aged 5–15 Years: Educational Challenges and Practical Implications – A Literature Review

Adelina SULEJMANI

Abstract

This systematic review explores sexual behaviors among children aged 5–15 years diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), focusing on educational challenges and practical implications within the Albanian context. Sexual development is a natural part of growth, yet children with ASD often display atypical or misunderstood behaviors due to difficulties in social communication, sensory processing, and understanding social norms. Without tailored sexual education and professional guidance, these expressions may be misinterpreted as deviant or inappropriate, leading to stigmatization and exclusion. The review identifies five major themes from 24 peer-reviewed studies: (1) common and atypical sexual behaviors, (2) lack of tailored sexual education, (3) challenges faced by parents and teachers, (4) social and legal risks associated with inappropriate behaviors, and (5) the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions. This review emphasizes the urgent need for adapted educational curricula, teacher training, and family support systems in Albania. It proposes practical frameworks inspired by international models that can guide inclusive, evidence-based practice.

Keywords: *Autism, sexual behavior, sexual education, children, educational challenges, inclusive education, Albania.*

Introduction

Sexual development in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) represents an often overlooked and sensitive issue in educational and social contexts. These behaviors, though part of normal development, may differ significantly in form and frequency among children with ASD, largely due to challenges in communication, social understanding, and impulse regulation (Stokes & Kaur, 2005). Misinterpretation of such behaviors can lead to stigmatization, inappropriate disciplinary action, or even legal consequences for families and schools (Lee et al., 2016). In Albania, awareness and professional training on sexuality in autism remain limited. Teachers and parents often report a lack of adequate knowledge, structured programs, and professional support when addressing these issues (García-Villamizar & Hughes, 2007). The aim of this review is to synthesize existing international and regional evidence on sexual behaviors in children with ASD, identify educational challenges, and outline practical, context-relevant recommendations for Albania.

Research Question and Objectives

Research Question

What are the main patterns of sexual behaviors in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder aged 5–15, and how can educational systems in Albania effectively address the related challenges?

Objectives

1. To identify common and atypical patterns of sexual behavior in children with ASD.
2. To analyze existing literature on sexual education strategies and interventions for this group.
3. To explore challenges faced by parents, educators, and support staff.

To propose culturally sensitive educational strategies and policy recommendations for Albania.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design, using a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis. This design was chosen to synthesize current knowledge and identify conceptual patterns across existing research.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive search was conducted from February to May 2025 using PubMed, ERIC, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect. The Rayyan platform was used to manage references and apply blinded inclusion/exclusion procedures to minimize bias.

Keywords

Search terms included: ‘Autism AND sexual behavior AND children’, ‘Autistic children AND sexuality education’, ‘Challenging sexual behaviors AND ASD’, ‘Inclusive education AND autism AND sexuality’, ‘Albania AND autism AND teacher training AND sexual behavior’.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed studies (2010–2024) focused on children aged 5–15 with ASD, addressing sexual behaviors, education, interventions, or challenges, published in English or Albanian. Exclusion criteria: adult-focused, unclear methodology, or biological-only puberty studies.

Sampling and Data Selection

From 243 initial studies, 59 were reviewed in full, and 24 met inclusion criteria. Sample size was determined by data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following six steps: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting.

STEP 1: Getting to know the data

After the final selection of the 24 articles that met the inclusion criteria, a full and careful reading of each paper was conducted to understand the context, objectives, methodology, and key findings. During this step, initial notes were made regarding recurring themes and relevant issues.

STEP 2: Creation of initial codes

A manual coding process was conducted, in which important text segments related to the topic of sexual behaviors in children with ASD were identified. These codes included elements such as: lack of sexual education, parental responses, teachers' approach, inappropriate behaviors, educational interventions, etc.

STEP 3: Research on topics

The codes were grouped into broader categories and analyzed to identify recurring themes representing clear conceptual patterns in the literature. Five main themes were identified that reflected the challenges and educational needs regarding sexual behaviors in children with autism.

STEP 4: Review of topics

The identified themes were reviewed in relation to the initial data to ensure that they were consistently supported by the literature and did not represent only isolated cases. This phase helped refine the definitions of the themes and exclude codes that did not contribute to the overall understanding of the issue.

STEP 5: Determining and naming topics

Each topic was named and clearly defined to represent the content it covered. The names were simple and concise, aiming to convey the essence of the problem presented by each topic.

STEP 6: The preparation of the report

In the final phase, the themes were integrated into the narrative analysis of the paper and illustrated with concrete examples from the reviewed articles. This approach allowed for a clear structuring of the findings and the extraction of practical implications and recommendations for education and intervention in the Albanian context.

Findings

Five major themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Common and atypical sexual behaviors – Behaviors range from normative curiosity to socially inappropriate actions such as public touching or undressing (Koller, 2000).
2. Lack of tailored sexual education – Few structured curricula exist to address sexuality in children with ASD, creating confusion for teachers and parents (Ballan, 2012).
3. Challenges for parents and teachers – Limited professional training and cultural taboos hinder effective responses (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011).
4. Risks and social implications – Misinterpretation of sexual behaviors can lead to stigmatization, exclusion, and legal consequences (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014).
5. Need for comprehensive intervention – Integrative programs combining parent training, visual learning, and ABA-based strategies show strong potential (Travers & Tincani, 2010).

Main topics identified

Based on the literature review and thematic analysis, the main findings regarding sexual behaviors in children with autism aged 5–15 years and the challenges associated with them are as follows:

TABLE 1. Main themes identified from the literature

Main Topic	Short description
Common and atypical sexual behaviors	Behaviors ranging from normal curiosity to inappropriate public expressions
Lack of tailored sexual education with ASD	Lack of programs designed for the specific needs of children
Challenges for parents and teachers	Unpreparedness and lack of resources for dealing with sexual behaviors
Risks and social implications	Isolation, legal misunderstandings, and harsh reactions to children's behavior
The need for comprehensive intervention	Development of policies, programs, and systemic support for children with ASD

- 1) **Common and atypical sexual behaviors.** Children with ASD show a wide range of sexual behaviors, including here a typical developmental sexual behavior such as curiosity and exploration, as well as atypical behaviors that

may appear inappropriate in public or social settings. Children with ASD display self-stimulatory sexual behaviors, body exposure, or inappropriate touching, often as a result of a lack of social awareness (Koller, 2000; Stokes & Kaur, 2005).

- 2) **Lack of tailored sexual education:** A large part of the literature highlights the absence of sexual education programs aimed for children with ASD, making it difficult for teachers and parents to provide adequate and understandable guidance for this group. For many children with ASD, a structured sexual education curriculum is missing. Personalized models have shown a positive effect in reducing risky behaviors (Ballan, 2012; Nichols & Blakeley-Smith, 2009).
- 3) **Challenges for parents and teaching staff:** Parents and teachers often feel unprepared and insecure about how to handle the sexual behaviors of children with autism, due to the lack of appropriate training and resources. Parents often feel unsure and unprepared, while teachers lack training to address sexual behaviors in children with ASD (Mehzabin & Stokes, 2011).
- 4) **The risks of inappropriate behaviors** bring social and legal dangers. Sexually inappropriate behaviors, in the absence of effective interventions, can cause social isolation for children, stigmatization, and even legal consequences for families and educational institutions. Misinterpreted behaviors can lead to severe disciplinary interventions or social isolation. Sexual victimization is also an increased risk (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014).

The need for a comprehensive intervention: Literature suggests that only a comprehensive approach, which includes the development of tailored sexual education curricula, teacher training, and support for families, can help in the effective management of these challenges. Methods such as Social Stories, visual education, and ABA-based programs are effective (Travers & Tincani, 2010; Ruble & Dalrymple, 1993).

Albanian Context:

Existing studies and analyses are limited in Albania; however, international evidence suggests that the lack of training and social stigma are factors that are negatively affecting this context as well, emphasizing the need for local adaptation of good international practices.

In Albania

- Sexual education for children with ASD is not included in current educational policies and programs in Albania.
- Cultural stigmas encourage silence and avoidance of the topic.
- There is a notable lack in training for teaching assistants and educators.

- Families seek clear strategies and structured support.
- International models can be adapted for local use, e.g., the “Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism” program (Autism Speaks, 2020).

Discussion

The findings confirm that sexual behaviors in children with ASD are often misunderstood due to lack of knowledge and cultural barriers. While Western studies offer valuable frameworks, the Albanian context lacks culturally adapted resources. In Albania, sexual education is not included in IEPs, professional training is minimal, and cultural stigma fosters silence. Families request clear, structured guidance. Addressing these issues requires collaboration among teachers, parents, and therapists, as well as national-level reforms. Programs such as ‘Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Autism’ (Autism Speaks, 2020) can be adapted for Albanian schools.

Implications and Recommendations

1. Integrate sexuality education for children with ASD into national education strategies.
2. Provide continuous professional development for teachers, assistants, and psychologists.
3. Offer parent workshops to manage and discuss sexuality development positively.
4. Create visual, story-based, and ABA-informed materials tailored for ASD learners.
5. Encourage local empirical studies to generate context-specific data.
6. Address societal stigma through awareness and inclusion campaigns.

Conclusion

Sexual behaviors in children with autism are a natural part of development that require informed, structured, and compassionate responses. This systematic review highlights a significant gap in the Albanian education system regarding sexual education for children with ASD. Addressing this gap through culturally adapted, evidence-based programs will foster inclusion, reduce stigma, and improve quality of life for children and families.

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The impact of psychological self-diagnosis on mental health among young adults in Albania: Shkodra's case

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Abstract

Purpose: *This study explores the psychological and social factors influencing self-diagnosis of mental disorders among individuals aged 18–35 in Albania, with particular attention to the role of social media, stigma, and limited access to professional mental health care.*

Design/methodology/approach: *A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing focus group discussions with 24 participants across four demographically diverse groups. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes related to mental health perception, self-diagnosis, and online media influence.*

Findings: *Findings indicate that self-diagnosis is driven by a complex interplay of media exposure, lack of psychoeducation, social stigma, and healthcare inaccessibility. Participants reported difficulty differentiating normal emotional experiences from clinical disorders and often relied on social media for mental health information. Self-diagnosis was described as both empowering and disorienting, with implications for identity formation and help-seeking behavior.*

Research limitations/implications: *The study's qualitative scope and limited sample size restrict generalizability. Future research should adopt mixed methods and cross-cultural comparisons to deepen understanding of self-diagnosis dynamics.*

Practical implications: *The results suggest a need for targeted psychoeducation, increased access to professional care, and ethical oversight of mental health content in digital media environments.*

Social implications: *The findings underscore the broader societal impacts of misinformation and stigma on mental health outcomes, especially in emerging democracies with limited health infrastructure.*

Originality/value: *This study provides novel insights into self-diagnosis in a Southeast European context, contributing to global discourse on digital mental health, stigma, and youth vulnerability.*

Keywords: *Self-diagnosis, mental health, social media, stigma, youth, Albania*

Introduction

Since the world started getting its dopamine from scrolling and swiping, most of the mental health problems started rising. This shift has coincided with a notable rise in reported mental health issues. In this context, empathy has become a strategic tool, often used by social media content creators not for genuine connection, but as a means to increase engagement metrics and outperform competitors.

How are these trends connected? Hassan and Barber (2021) suggest that individuals experiencing psychological distress may become more susceptible to accepting information at face value, particularly when it resonates with their emotional state. Although this study is relatively recent, it seems that many content creators have long recognized this psychological vulnerability and leveraged it for commercial gain. By producing relatable content about mental health, whether humorous or serious, creators can trigger identification in viewers, leading them to believe they might suffer from the same condition.

For example, a short video discussing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) may depict behaviors that seem familiar to a wide audience. Viewers, lacking clinical knowledge, may interpret these similarities as evidence of having OCD themselves. This phenomenon can initiate a cycle of self-diagnosis and psychological distress, wherein individuals begin to shape their self-concept and identity around an assumed mental health condition, often without professional assessment or guidance. Crucially, such as misinterpretations often arise from a failure to differentiate between natural emotional fluctuations and clinical pathology. For instance, experiencing occasional sadness, low energy, or emotional withdrawal is a normal part of human life and does not, in itself, indicate clinical

depression. Similarly, a preference for organization or perfectionism does not automatically suggest OCD, nor does being energetic or distractible necessarily imply ADHD. However, due to widespread psychoeducational deficits, many individuals do not possess the conceptual tools needed to critically assess their own mental states, leading them to rely on simplified digital narratives as frameworks for self-understanding.

In Albania, these global phenomena intersect with specific cultural and historical dynamics. As a post-communist society undergoing rapid social and economic change, Albania has seen significant shifts in how mental health is perceived and discussed. For decades, mental illness carried a heavy stigma, often associated with weakness, social deviance, or even danger. Despite some progress, professional mental health services remain underutilized, in part due to deep-rooted stigma and mistrust, but also due to limited access, especially in non-urban areas. In this context, many young Albanians find themselves caught between traditional cultural norms that discourage psychological openness and globalized media influences that promote constant self-analysis and emotional exposure.

Moreover, Albanian youth are increasingly exposed to Western cultural models, particularly through social media, and often seek to align themselves with global discourses around mental health, identity, and self-expression. This desire to “belong” to global youth culture fuels the adoption of concepts, labels, and narratives that may not fully align with their lived realities. The language of therapy, diagnosis, and emotional struggle is now part of everyday conversation among many young Albanians, often mediated through memes, short videos, and personal testimonials online. Yet in the absence of structured psychoeducation, this cultural borrowing can lead to over-pathologizing ordinary experiences, creating a generation that feels both hyper-aware of its mental health and disconnected from professional care.

Compounding this issue is the persistent stigma surrounding therapy and psychological help-seeking. Many Albanians, especially in traditional or conservative environments, continue to associate psychotherapy with severe mental illness or personal failure. As a result, instead of seeking professional guidance, individuals turn to social media as a more accessible, anonymous, and socially acceptable space to explore their emotional challenges. Here, they find content that may feel validating but is rarely diagnostic or clinically reliable. Self-diagnosis becomes a form of emotional self-regulation, a way of naming internal struggles and making sense of distress, without the perceived risk of social judgment or professional scrutiny.

The privatization of mental health, shaped by algorithms, social comparison, and global narratives, raises concerns about the loss of clinical accuracy and the potential for increased psychological distress. When individuals self-identify with a disorder without professional evaluation, they may engage in maladaptive coping

strategies, avoid evidence-based treatments, or internalize stigmatizing identities that limit their social and emotional development. The emotional economy of social media, where vulnerability is often rewarded with attention and validation, can unintentionally incentivize exaggerated or misinterpreted self-disclosures, blurring the lines between authentic emotional expression and performance.

In this regard, self-diagnosis must be understood not as an isolated behavior, but as part of a broader cultural and psychosocial process in which media narratives, social pressures, and psychological needs converge. Therefore, the need for increased mental health literacy, culturally sensitive psychoeducation, and accessible psychological services is more urgent than ever. Ultimately, the research aims to open a dialogue about how global mental health discourse is interpreted and lived within local contexts, and how societies like Albania can face the challenges and opportunities that come with this evolving reality.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to explore how individuals aged 18-35 in Shkodër, Albania perceive and practice psychological self-diagnosis, as well as the impact of this phenomenon on their mental well-being, self-perception and their behavior towards seeking professional help. In a post-communist context and with the strong influence of social media, the aim is to understand how non-professional sources of psychological information interfere with the construction of emotional identity and the relationship with psychological symptoms. The study also aims to identify cultural and social barriers that affect the use of mental health services, as well as the alternative self-medication strategies that individuals undertake.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that affect the scope and interpretation of its findings. As a qualitative inquiry, it does not aim for statistical generalizability but focuses on exploring subjective experiences and perceptions of self-diagnosis among individuals aged 18-35 in Shkodër, Albania. The use of purposive sampling may have limited the demographic diversity of participants. But despite these constraints, the study offers valuable insight into an emerging psychological and social phenomenon with significant relevance for mental health discourse and practice.

Research questions

- What are the main sources of information that influence the formation of these personal diagnoses?
- How does self-diagnosis affect individuals' self-perception, mental well-being, and behavior toward seeking professional help?
- What alternative strategies do participants use to cope with emotional difficulties in the absence of professional help?
- How does social stigma affect the process of self-diagnosis and help-seeking?

Literature review

Psychological Self-Awareness and Self-Evaluation

The foundation of self-diagnosis lies in an individual's capacity for self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-evaluation (Knof et al., 2024). These concepts have long been central in psychological theory, particularly in the works of Carl Rogers and Albert Bandura, who provided critical frameworks for understanding how individuals perceive themselves and their internal states.

According to Carl Rogers' Self Theory (1951), individuals possess a self-concept, which encompasses their beliefs, values, and perceptions about who they are. Rogers emphasized the importance of congruence between the "real self" (how a person perceives themselves) and the "ideal self" (who they wish to be). When a discrepancy exists between these two, individuals experience incongruence, which often manifests as psychological discomfort or dissatisfaction. In contemporary digital contexts, such incongruence may drive individuals to seek explanations or labels for their distress, sometimes through self-diagnosis. In this sense, self-diagnosis is used as a coping mechanism, to reduce internal conflict, by offering an external justification.

In parallel, Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) refers to self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to interpret and respond to emotional challenges. When individuals perceive themselves as ineffective in dealing with psychological stress or emotions, they are more likely to seek external validation or frameworks that help them make sense of their experience. In this regard, self-diagnosis may function as an attempt to regain control.

Stigma, Self-Stigma and the Role of Social Media in Psychological Help-Seeking

An important factor that influences the prevalence of self-diagnosis is the social stigma surrounding mental health, particularly the negative perceptions attached to seeking professional help. According to Corrigan's (2002) model of mental health stigma, stigma exists at two levels, one is public stigma and the other is self-stigma. Public stigma refers to the prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors that society directs towards individuals with mental illness or those seeking therapy. These public narratives are then internalized by individuals, resulting in self-stigma, a process in which individuals apply negative stereotypes to themselves, leading to shame, lowered self-esteem, and ultimately avoidance of professional help. This internalized stigma significantly contributes to the decision to self-diagnose, allowing individuals to recognize their emotional struggles without having to expose themselves to societal judgment through formal diagnosis or therapy.

The proliferation of digital media has transformed how mental health is discussed and understood. In recent years, social media platforms have become the primary source of mental health information for many young people, especially in countries where psychoeducation is limited and mental health services are underutilized. According to Repeated Exposure Theory (Moreno et al., 2013), frequent exposure to certain messages leads individuals to accept these narratives as normal or accurate representations of their own experiences. Moreover, Media Priming Theory (Nabi, 2009) suggests that repeated exposure to media narratives shapes cognitive frameworks, priming individuals to interpret their emotional and behavioral experiences in line with what they consume. This effect is intensified by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), as individuals measure their emotional and psychological states against the experiences of others portrayed online. The result is a normalization of diagnostic labeling, often driven not by clinical need, but by a desire to belong, understand, or explain oneself.

Emotional Normality versus Psychopathology

One of the central issues in the phenomenon of self-diagnosis is the difficulty individuals have in distinguishing between normal emotional experiences and symptoms of psychological disorders. This ambiguity is often magnified by limited psychoeducation, cultural misperceptions about mental health, and the simplified diagnostic narratives online. To understand how these blurred boundaries impact self-diagnosis, it is essential to explore the theoretical underpinnings of emotional normality versus psychopathology, particularly as articulated by Aaron Beck, Judith Beck, and other cognitive theorists.

According to Beck's Cognitive Theory of Emotional Disorders (Beck, 1967), emotional responses such as sadness, fear, and frustration are normal and adaptive in many life situations. However, dysfunctional patterns of thinking, such as catastrophizing, overgeneralization, or persistent negative automatic thoughts, can lead to emotional states that meet the criteria for psychological disorders. Judith Beck (2011) emphasizes that context, duration, intensity, and functional impairment are key criteria in distinguishing normal emotional states from clinical conditions. Research by Furnham and Stacey (1991) found that individuals often rely on simplified, binary models of mental health (seeing oneself as either "well" or "ill", which leads to rigid categorization of emotional states. Additionally, scholars such as Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) argue that society increasingly interprets ordinary sadness or worry as symptoms requiring medical intervention, a phenomenon they refer to as "the loss of sadness".

Literature Empirical Findings

A growing body of empirical research has begun to examine the phenomenon of psychological self-diagnosis, particularly in the context of widespread access to digital media and increased public discourse on mental health. Studies have investigated the prevalence, drivers, and consequences of self-diagnosis across different populations, offering valuable insights into its psychological, social, and cultural dimensions.

A qualitative study by Underhill and Foulkes (2024) explored attitudes toward self-diagnosis of mental disorders on Reddit, analyzing 1195 user comments. The findings revealed five key themes, including tensions over who holds diagnostic authority, the role of self-diagnosis as a coping strategy in an accessible mental health system, and the perception that adolescents are especially prone to social media-induced self-diagnosis. The study highlighted both derision and validation in public discourse, telling that while self-diagnosis can offer a sense of understanding, it may also lead to loss of credibility in genuine help-seeking.

A quantitative pilot study by Armstrong et al. (2025) examined youth entering mental health treatment in Canada. All participants reported frequent engagement with online mental health content, with social media usage significantly predicting self-diagnosis behaviors. Notably, many participants believed they had diagnoses not given by clinicians, and these beliefs were strongly associated with viewing content on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.

In the United States, Tse and Haslam (2024) employed structural equation modeling with a nationally representative sample of 474 adults to investigate predictors of self-diagnosis. This study found that individuals with broader concepts of mental disorder, i.e., more expansive understanding of what constitutes a mental illness, were significantly more likely to self-diagnose. This relationship held independently of actual distress, mental health literacy, or stigma.

From a sociocultural angle, Corzine and Roy (2024) discussed how identity formation on social media can promote self-diagnosis as a means of ingroup belonging. Their review highlighted phenomena such as “Munchausen by Internet” and mass sociogenic illness, emphasizing that online communities may foster environments where diagnostic labels are prerequisites for participation and validation. These dynamics suggest that social contagion and performative identity play roles in shaping self-diagnosis trends among youth.

Foster and Ellis (2024) analyzed the influence of TikTok content on adolescents’ self-diagnosis practices, applying social psychological theories of identity, belonging and self-labeling. The study argued that self-diagnosis is a complex response to barriers in healthcare access. Another perspective comes from Ahuja and Fichadia (2024), who addressed the romanticization and glorification of mental illness on social media, particularly among Generation Z. The authors argue that while increased awareness is beneficial, the popularization of self-diagnosis through memes and trends may trivialize genuine disorders and reinforce misconceptions, thereby complicating the task of mental health professionals and potentially undermining destigmatization efforts.

Lastly, the global variability in stigma and its impact on self-diagnosis has been documented by Ahad et al. (2023). Their cross-cultural review showed that stigma remains a significant barrier to help-seeking and contributes to avoidance of professional care in favor of self-diagnosis.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing scholarly attention toward this topic, several notable gaps persist in the existing body of research. Much of the available literature focuses on Western populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding how self-diagnosis manifests in developing or transitional societies, such as Albania and other Balkan countries.

Few studies have examined the long-term psychological effects of self-diagnosis, especially in terms of how it may influence identity formation, decision-making regarding professional help-seeking. Also, existing literature tends to treat self-diagnosis as an isolated phenomenon, without adequately situating it within broader social, economic, and cultural frameworks, such as globalization, medical consumerism, and the commodification of mental health online. In the Albanian context, for instance, the desire for cultural alignment with Western norms may influence how young people internalize and replicate digital mental health discourses, a perspective that is currently missing from scholarly work.

These gaps highlight the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and developmentally nuanced studies that go beyond mere description of trends and aim to theorize the psychological, social, and structural mechanisms underpinning self-diagnosis in underrepresented populations.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study was conducted within the framework of qualitative research, aiming to deepen the understanding of experiences and perceptions related to the phenomenon of psychological self-diagnosis. The qualitative method was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the topic, where the goal is to extract rich and detailed data about the subjective dimensions of human experience. Specifically, the focus group method was employed, which allows open dialogue among participants and highlights diverse perspectives within a social and cultural context.

Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of 18 participants, divided into three focus groups of six members each. Participants were individuals between 18 and 35 years, purposefully selected to ensure representation across different age groups within this range, taking into account gender and socio-economic background. The selection aimed to include individuals with direct or indirect experience and awareness of psychological self-diagnosis phenomena through their personal or social context. The division into age groups (18-24, 25-29, and 30-35 years) was made to assess whether perceptions vary according to age.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three focus groups conducted physically in appropriate and quiet settings in the city of Shkodër. Each focus group was moderated by a trained facilitator who employed a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. This format enabled free and in-depth discussions, revealing participants' experiences and perceptions regarding self-diagnosis and its impact on psychological well-being. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the prior consent of participants for transcription and subsequent analysis.

Study Instrument

The focus group guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to stimulate reflection and discussion on key study themes, including: personal experiences

and perceptions related to psychological self-diagnosis; the influence of media and online sources on shaping these perceptions; differentiation between normal emotional states and psychological disorders; barriers and motivators for seeking professional psychological help.

Procedure

Before conducting the focus groups, participants were fully informed about the study's aims and provided written informed consent. They were also assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study without any consequences. The focus groups took place in neutral and comfortable environments designed to encourage open and candid discussions, where participants felt free to express their thoughts and experiences.

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved several stages: familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts; initial coding to identify significant data segments; collating codes into overarching themes; reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and consistency; interpreting and reporting themes in alignment with the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the highest ethical standards in psychological research. Participants provided informed consent after being fully informed about the purpose, nature, and procedures of the study. Data were treated confidentially, and anonymity was ensured through the use of coding and exclusion of identifying details in analysis and reporting. Participants were free to refuse or withdraw from participation at any time without repercussions. Additionally, measures were taken to address the emotional sensitivity of the topic and to provide support if needed.

Findings

The analysis revealed several key themes that reflect the perceptions, experiences and impacts of psychological self-diagnosis in the daily lives of the participants. The identified themes are the result of systematic coding and interpretation of transcripts, and reflect the complex nuances of the phenomenon in the Albanian context.

*Theme 1:
Self-Diagnosis As a Feeling of Empowerment, But Also Confusion*

One of the most prominent and consistent themes that emerged from the focus group analysis was the perception of self-diagnosis as a way to take control of one's psychological well-being. Participants saw this phenomenon as a way to take control of empowerment, where the individual takes an active role in recognizing and understanding their symptoms, avoiding exclusive dependence on mental health professionals. This aspect of "taking the diagnosis into one's own hands" is often described as an attempt at greater autonomy and self-awareness, appearing as a reaction to the lack of easy access to psychological services, but also as a reflection of the contemporary trend towards self-improvement and personal health management.

"When I look online for my symptoms, I feel like I have an answer in my hand, something that helps me not be alone with what I am feeling." (Focus Group 1, participant 3, 22 years old)

This sense of empowerment has a positive impact on self-esteem and a sense of personal capacity to cope with psychological challenges. Furthermore, it helps reduce feelings of isolation and insecurity, as participants feel equipped with information and tools to navigate the complex world of mental health.

However, at the same time, participants highlighted that this practice is often accompanied by confusion and uncertainty, especially due to the large amount of information distributed on the internet, which is sometimes contradictory. For many of them, there is a lack of clear dividing lines between what is considered "normal" and "clinical problem", creating additional dilemmas and anxiety.

"At first I thought I had depression, but then I realized that maybe it was just a bad day that everyone goes through." (Focus Group 2, participant 1, 27 years old)

The ambivalence reflects a deep gap between the desire for knowledge and control over oneself and the need for professional support and expertise. Participants expressed the need for a clearer and more reliable guide that can help in interpreting symptoms and in distinguishing between normal emotional reactions and situations that require clinical intervention.

*Theme 2:
The Difficulty in Differentiating Between Natural Emotions
and Psychological Problems*

Another essential theme that emerged in the focus group analysis was the difficulty of participants in making a clear distinction between natural emotional experiences and possible signs of psychological disorders. This challenge appears

as a direct consequence of the lack of in-depth psychological knowledge in the public, but also as a result of the bombardment of uncontrolled and often contradictory information from unreliable sources, especially on the Internet and social networks. Participants expressed a perception that concepts such as “depression” and “anxiety” have become somewhat of a “label” used loosely in everyday conversation, sometimes leading to an over- or under-reporting of symptoms.

“Now everything seems like depression or anxiety. Sometimes I get the impression that many people are giving too much importance to emotions that are simply a normal part of life.” (Focus Group 3, participant 4, 31 years old)

This “dissemination of normality” creates a gap where individuals feel uncertain about what is a normal emotional reaction and what constitutes a clinical problem that requires professional intervention. Furthermore, this situation contributes to the risk of inaccurate self-diagnosis and failure to recognize the need for adequate help.

Theme 3: Media and the Impact of Social Networks

The focus group analysis highlighted that social media and online sources have become main source of information about psychological diagnoses and different symptoms. Participants often mentioned that they gained knowledge mainly from videos, blogs, and discussions on social networks, emphasizing the strong influence that these platforms have on their perception.

“I often see videos on Instagram or TikTok that talk about anxiety or ADHD and I understand a lot of them in myself. But I’m not sure if it’s accurate.” (Focus Group 1, participant 5, 20 years old)

“I’ve seen a lot of posts that describe symptoms of depression, and sometimes I feel like I’m fulfilling them, but I don’t know if I should worry or not.” (Focus Group 2, participant 3, 24 years old)

“On TikTok there are a lot of videos that talk about different disorders, and people do tests or diagnose themselves. This makes me think that it’s becoming very easy to say ‘I have a problem’.” (Focus Group 3, participant 1, 29 years old)

A large proportion of participants expressed a sense of uncertainty and confusion due to the lack of reliable and professionally vetted sources on the internet.

“Sometimes I feel like there is too much information and it is not always accurate. People post everything without thinking and it gets confused with what is real.” (Focus Group 1, participant 2, 21 years old)

Participants also noted that, although social media helps in sharing experiences and reducing feelings of isolation, it can also foster anxiety and inaccurate self-diagnoses, due to the nature of the rapid and raw consumption of content.

“There are many people who use the internet to look for answers, but without the help of experts, it is like searching in the dark.” (Focus Group 2, participant 6, 27 years old)

Overall, this theme highlights the tension between the advantages that social media offers in accessing information and the risks arising from misinformation and lack of adequate psychological education.

Theme 4: Fear of Stigma and Obstacles in Seeking Professional Help

Another theme with a strong presence in the focus groups was the fear of social stigma and prejudices related to seeking psychological help. This fear manifests itself as a major barrier that prevents individuals from expressing their concerns and seeking professional treatment, leading to concealment, isolation and in some cases worsening of the psychological state.

Participants described stigmatization as a deeply rooted cultural and social phenomenon, where mental health is often seen as a sign of weakness, incompetence or madness. This perception contributes to feelings of shame and fear of judgment from family, friends and the wider community.

“I don’t want people to see me as crazy, so I prefer not to talk about my problems.” (Focus Group 2, participant 2, 28 years old)

“In Shkodra, and beyond, it is very difficult to admit that you need a psychologist. You are often treated as if you are weak or as someone who cannot cope with life.” (Focus Group 1, participant 4, 25 years old)

This social stigma directly affects the way individuals perceive themselves and their personal worth. For many, the presence of psychological problems is seen as a personal failure, increasing feelings of guilt and low self-esteem.

“I think a lot of people don’t seek help because they feel like they’re admitting they’re weak, which is unacceptable to them.” (Focus Group 3, Participant 3, 33 years old)

Another consequence of this stigma is the preference to deal with problems in silence and avoid discussing them, even with close family members.

“Sometimes it’s easier to deal with everything alone than to open up and feel judged or rejected.” (Focus Group 2, Participant 5, 29 years old)

This pattern of silence and humiliation constitutes a major obstacle to early intervention and improving mental health in the community. Participants emphasized that the lack of community support and public education in this area exacerbates the situation.

“We don’t have enough education about mental health; people don’t understand the importance and continue to stigmatize anyone who has psychological problems.” (Focus Group 1, participant 6, 23 years old)

Theme 5: Perceptions about the Psychologist

A theme that emerged widely across all focus groups was the ambivalent perception that participants have towards the figure of the psychologist and the process of seeking professional help. For most, the psychologist was still seen as a “last resort”, to be used only in extreme cases or by individuals considered to have “big problems”.

“People here think that the psychologist is for crazy people. No one goes just to talk, they will judge you.” (Focus Group 3, participant 2, 31 years old)

In addition to negative perceptions, participants also mentioned economic and practical barriers to accessing professional help. Psychological help was often seen as a “luxury” or unaffordable, especially for the young and unemployed.

“Even if I wanted to go, I don’t have the financial means. The prices are high and there is no help from the state.” (Focus Group 2, participant 5, 25 years old)

Another obstacle was distrust in the professionalism of psychologists, due to lack of direct experience, lack of information, or negative experiences of acquaintances.

“I have heard cases where people went and didn’t help at all, sometimes it seems like a waste of time.” (Focus Group 1, participant 6, 22 years old)

Faced with these obstacles, many participants use alternative self-medication strategies to manage psychological concerns. The most mentioned were searching for information online, trying to self-regulate emotions, talking to trusted friends or family, and simple practices such as walking, listening to music, or physical activity.

“When I feel bad, I usually search the internet for what I can get and what I can do on my own to get through it.” (Focus Group 1, participant 3, 20 years old)

“I can’t go to a psychologist, but I talk to my friends, I try to keep myself busy with things that relax me.” (Focus Group 2, participant 4, 27 years old)

Although these strategies help in the short-term management of symptoms, some participants felt that they are not always sufficient, and can often lead to postponing professional treatment, increasing the emotional burden.

“I know I’m not solving the problem, but it’s better than doing nothing.” (Focus Group 3, participant 1, 29 years old)

Theme 6: Diagnosis as Identity

Another important finding was the way in which self-diagnosis influences the construction of self-perception and the way participants interact with others. Many of them described a process of internalizing the diagnosis, seeing it as an important part of their identity, often in a limiting or reductive way.

“After I thought I had ADHD, I started to blame it all the time. It seemed like everything I did was because of it.” (Focus Group 2, participant 1, 23 years old)

This approach often creates a division between the “normal self” and the “diagnosed self,” producing identity confusion and sometimes a kind of “shelter” behind a label that provides simplified meaning for the feelings or difficulties experienced.

“I don’t know if I really have a disorder, but it’s easier to explain myself when I give it a name.” (Focus Group 1, participant 2, 21 years old)

Interpersonally, some participants expressed a sense of distrust and lack of validation from others when sharing self-diagnoses. This generates feelings of rejection or underestimation.

“When I told my friend that I was experiencing anxiety, she said ‘me too sometimes’, as if it didn’t matter.” (Focus Group 3, participant 6, 26 years old)

Others noticed that the diagnosis began to be used as an excuse for certain behaviors, which affected their motivation to cope with difficulties or to seek professional help.

“When I told myself ‘You have anxiety’, I felt like I was no longer responsible for anything that happened around me.” (Focus Group 2, participant 4, 24 years old)

In essence, this topic raises important questions about the danger of reducing oneself to a psychological label and about the relationship between self-diagnosis and self-responsibility. Some participants expressed a desire to find a balance between self-understanding and non-limitation, acknowledging feelings without totally identifying with them.

“I believe that sometimes we are just sad or tired, without the need to diagnose ourselves.” (Focus Group 1, participant 5, 30 years old)

This finding under outlines the need for balanced education in the field of psychology that helps individuals understand themselves without narrowing their identity in pathological terms, as well as for building a culture that promotes empathy without hyper-diagnosis.

Long-Term Impact on Psychological Well-Being and Decision-Making

This topic marked a deeper reflection by participants on the long-term consequences of self-diagnosis, both on daily well-being and on the psychological decision-making process. In most cases, participants indicated that after starting to identify with a self-imposed diagnosis, they changed the way they face challenges, how they understand emotions, and how they build expectations for themselves.

“After I started thinking that I had depression, I felt like I shouldn’t expect too much from myself. Everything seemed harder to me.” (Focus Group 3, participant 5, 26 years old)

Self-diagnosis, in some cases, became a kind of “script” for behavior and perception of reality, affecting self-confidence, capacity to cope with stress, as well as motivation to take steps for change.

“Sometimes I feel like I use this ‘diagnosis’ as an excuse not to do certain things.” (Focus Group 2, participant 3, 30 years old)

However, some participants experienced self-diagnosis as an initial process of awareness, which helped them to stop and reflect on their emotions and psychological needs.

“It helped me understand that I am not always well, and that I probably need help. But it opened up more dilemmas for me than it gave me solutions.” (Focus Group 1, participant 2, 24 years old)

This ambiguity between help and hindrance illustrates that self-diagnosis has the potential to be a psychological crossroads: it can serve as a catalyst for increased awareness, but it can also create psychological blockages and rigid expectations of oneself and the future.

“I caught myself thinking that I would never get better, because this is ‘my problem’. It makes me feel helpless.” (Focus Group 3, participant 1, 29 years old)

In this context, self-diagnosis can also affect one’s relationship with time and personal progress. Several participants mentioned a feeling of being frozen in an emotional state, where psychological identity becomes an obstacle to personal development.

“I feel like I’m stuck with this idea that I have a certain problem, and I can’t get out of it.” (Focus Group 2, participant 6, 27 years old)

Discussion

The participants in this study revealed complex and often conflicting attitudes toward self-diagnosis. On one hand, the act of self-diagnosing was perceived as a form of empowerment and autonomy in navigating emotional struggles in a context of limited access to professional care. On the other hand, it was also associated with confusion, anxiety, and identity entanglement, particularly when self-diagnosis was based on unreliable or oversimplified information from social media. The normality of self-diagnosis, that underscores the difficulty experienced in distinguishing between normative emotional experiences and signs of clinical pathology, aligns with the concept of “concept creep” (Haslam, 2016), wherein the definitions of mental disorder have expanded, leading individuals to interpret normal distress as a symptom of mental illness.

Another central finding was the persistence of stigma, both public and self-directed, in relation to seeking professional psychological help. Corrigan’s (2012) model of mental health stigma is highly relevant. Public stigma leads to self-stigma,

reducing the likelihood of help-seeking. Participants reported feeling ashamed or fearful of judgement, leading them to rely on self-diagnosis and alternative coping mechanisms rather than engaging with mental health professionals. In Albania, where mental health infrastructure is limited and societal attitudes toward mental illness remain conservative, this stigma is compounded by logistical and cultural barriers to accessing care.

The findings have several implications. Clinically, they highlight the urgent need for increased access to mental health education and services, particularly targeted at youth and young adults. Psychoeducational campaigns should aim to clarify the distinction between emotional discomfort and clinical disorders, thereby mitigating the over-pathologization of normal experiences.

Socially, there is a need to challenge stigma through culturally sensitive public discourse and policy reform, reducing barriers to care and promoting trust in mental health professionals. Given the role of social media, regulatory frameworks could also consider the ethical responsibilities of content creators who disseminate mental health information.

Conclusion

Self-diagnosis emerges as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the convergence of digital media influence, societal stigma surrounding mental health, and systemic barriers to accessing professional psychological services. In contemporary society, especially within emerging democracies such as Albania, individuals, particularly those aged 18–35, increasingly turn to online platforms for mental health information, often in the absence of affordable or accessible professional care. While this self-directed approach to mental health may offer temporary relief, a sense of agency, or validation for emotional experiences, it also introduces significant risks. These include misidentification of symptoms, over-pathologization of normal emotional states, internalization of stigmatizing labels, and the potential for prolonged psychological distress due to delayed or inappropriate intervention.

Furthermore, the widespread dissemination of mental health content on social media, often presented by unqualified individuals or driven by algorithmic engagement rather than clinical accuracy, can amplify confusion and reinforce unhealthy self-perceptions. This environment not only perpetuates misinformation but also distorts the public understanding of mental illness and its treatment.

To mitigate these challenges, a comprehensive and integrated response is required, one that combines psychoeducational initiatives to improve mental health literacy, policy reforms that enhance access to care, and strategic clinical outreach tailored to digitally connected populations. Special attention must be given to

vulnerable youth who are simultaneously navigating identity development, socio-economic uncertainty, and pervasive digital engagement. In this socio-political context, ensuring accurate, accessible, and destigmatized mental health resources is essential for promoting informed help-seeking behaviors and safeguarding psychological well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to address the growing phenomenon of self-diagnosis of mental health conditions, particularly among young adults in Albania.

There is an urgent need for the development and implementation of comprehensive psychoeducational programs aimed at improving mental health literacy across the general population. These programs should focus on clarifying the distinctions between normal emotional fluctuations and clinical psychological disorders, thereby reducing the prevalence of misdiagnosis and over-pathologization. Public awareness campaigns, school curricula, and community-based interventions should prioritize the dissemination of accurate, evidence-based information about mental health.

Albania's mental health services remain under-resourced and unevenly distributed. Policy reforms should aim to expand the availability, accessibility, and affordability of professional psychological care, particularly in underserved and rural areas. Increased investment in training mental health professionals, funding public clinics, and integrating mental health services into primary care settings would significantly reduce the need for individuals to rely on self-diagnosis due to lack of access.

Given the role of social media in shaping perceptions of mental illness, social media platforms should be encouraged—through collaboration with mental health authorities and relevant stakeholders—to implement ethical guidelines for mental health content. Content creators who address psychological topics should be required to include disclaimers, cite evidence-based sources, and clearly state that their content does not replace professional advice or diagnosis. Platform algorithms should also prioritize and promote verified, clinically accurate mental health content.

Public discourse must actively work to destigmatize mental illness and normalize help-seeking behavior. Government bodies, NGOs, and professional associations should collaborate to challenge cultural taboos and misconceptions around mental health. Campaigns that highlight lived experiences, promote empathy, and emphasize the value of professional care can play a vital role in transforming societal attitudes.

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The impact of dimensions of parenting styles on the self-esteem of the individual

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Abstract

This study addresses the relationship between self-esteem and dimensions of parenting styles. The purpose of this study is to show the relationship between dimensions of parenting styles and the child's self-esteem. The dimensions of parenting styles that have been studied in this paper are: Permissive, Authoritarian and Authoritative. From the research conducted in other studies, it results that the dimensions of parenting styles are related to self-esteem, where respectively the permissive and authoritative dimension is related to increased self-esteem, while the authoritative dimension is related to decreased self-esteem. Based on the data extracted from the results of the SPSS program for this study, it has resulted that there is a negative correlation between self-esteem and the permissive dimension of parenting styles. This means that the more permissive the parents are, the lower the children's self-esteem. For the authoritative dimension, a significant relationship bordering on self-esteem has resulted. This relationship was established only with the mother. So an authoritative mother brings about an increase in the child's self-esteem. For the relationship between the authoritative dimension and self-esteem, based on the data results, no correlation has resulted between them. Based on the studies conducted, it turns out that this result may come as a result of the fact that children do not see their parents today as authoritarian. From this study we come to the conclusion that the relationship between the dimensions of parenting styles and self-esteem depends on the way parents behave with their children, that is, the dimension of parenting styles they use with them.

Keywords: *dimensions, self-esteem, children.*

Introduction

General Perspectives

The perspective of this study is to show the relationship between self-esteem and dimensions of parenting styles. The main goal is to study how different dimensions of parenting styles affect the self-esteem of the individual. Also how different gender roles of parents affect children. The sample used is children who report on their parents. Two standardized questionnaires were used for this study. For the different dimensions of parenting styles, the PAQ test (Psychological scale, 2024) was used, which is composed of 30 separate statements for both genders of parents. The statements correspond to each dimension and children choose which statement is true for their parents. Regarding self-esteem, the Morris Rosenberg test (American Psychological Association, 2006) was used. This test contains a total of 10 statements that have their own calculation scales. The tests are put together in such a way that the individuals who complete them can measure two important aspects of the study, the dimensions of parenting styles and the self-esteem of the individuals. So how has a certain style of parents of different genders influenced the self-esteem of their children. Considering that the test for the dimensions of parenting styles is separate for both mothers and fathers, this shows us that there is a gender division in the way parents of different genders raise their children. As mentioned above, there are different dimensions of parenting styles.

Literature review

History of Parenting

Parenting styles and child care is a phenomenon that has its beginnings since 1800 until today (Positive parenting, 2019). People previously did not know the importance of the impact that the way you behave with children and get to know them in many dimensions has. Science has increasingly made parents understand that caring for their children is very important. Previously, parents did not have information on how to care for, behave and treat a child. They used old methods based on the culture they were raised in, religious beliefs, etc. But with the evolution of science and psychology, parents were challenged by science and accepted the fact that there are certain ways and rules to behave with children and not only based on some inherited rituals or customs. So in 1800 the first Industrial Revolution took place, which was also the birth of the first child care organization. Many children went out in protest to protect their rights, to get out of their slavery and to make others understand that they are human beings and enjoy full rights

like everyone else and not to be subjugated by others. So that, in 1833 and 1844 the first English laws were passed to reduce child labor. In 1887 the American Pediatric Association began to develop and its importance was understood. In 1912 the Children's Bureau was founded in the USA. The Children's Bureau of the USA provided information on infant care and maternal health issues. In the 1920s and onwards, science taught even more about the importance of the child and the behavior of parents towards them. Here it was seen in a broader perspective where parents were informed not only about physical aspects related to the child but also about how they should behave and treat their children.

*Parenting styles that were created
in 1928 and further developed to the present day*

Two parenting styles were the main ones during this period: the Victorian style of parenting centered on adults and the Freudian style centered on the child. Which were created by famous therapists and who made a great contribution to the development of psychology more broadly.

Victorian style of parenting centered on adults:

Behaviorist John Broadus Watson (1928) wrote his famous book "The Psychological Care of Infants and Children" before the Second World War. In this book he shares his views and beliefs about how children function and behave. Every action they do is explained in different ways and that the child is a being who can be taught by the examples he provides and the way he treats them. This book explains human beings in a very mechanical way. So the ways we decide to follow with people will give us certain results. He saw the child as an object, which can be formed and deformed at any time. According to him, parents should have an authoritarian, strict approach towards their children so that they grow up with all the rules they need in the future and know their limits. Many parents find this type of treatment of their child difficult, but Watson recommended that they give up the role of the compassionate parent but be more strict, strict with their rules and set limits for their children.

Freudian Parenting Style more child-centered:

Benjamin Spock (1946) created his book "In baby and child care" after the Second World War. Essentially it was the child and the love that should be conveyed to them. In this book Spock tried to encourage mothers to devote themselves to their child without neglecting their feelings, desires, the rights they have to have a warm and harmonious family. He completely rejects Watson's approach of treating children as mechanical objects that are taught using behavioral techniques and a pronounced lack of empathy. He emphasizes that children are very much in need

of their parents' love, care, and the importance they give them in the family. A good child grows up with love, dedication, and rules that interact with each other in the time and place of right. A child without love is an aggressive, cold and impulsive child. The child may make mistakes but the way he learns the right path is through warm words, dedication and not strict rules and harsh punishment.

Parenting styles

The way parents behave with their children is explained by science as divided into four types or parenting styles (Parenting for brain, 2024). All four of these types have their own characteristics that correspond to different types of parents. The way parents use to act with their children indicates both the further development of the child itself and the relationship that will be created when they are aware of their actions and know the reason why they do a certain action. The main parenting styles are: permissive, authoritative, neglectful and authoritarian. These styles were used by Diana Baumrind (2020), a developmental psychologist, who was a specialist in the development and dynamics of the parent-child relationship.

Permissive dimension of the parenting style:

They have distinctive characteristics from other styles as these parents have high responsibility but low demands on their children. (CNBC make it, 2021) These are parents who care about their children but do not pay attention to rules, norms or how the child should behave in social relationships, which includes relationships with family, friends and other close or not. These parents do not go along with the implementation of strict rules and not allowing the child to perform activities that would not be recommended for a certain age as various problems arise that may have no return and both parties find themselves in making a difficult decision.

Neglectful dimension of the parenting style:

Neglectful parenting, or parenting that is not involved, is cold and neglectful (Parenting for brain, 2024). From the word itself, this is a type of parent who is neither demanding nor tolerant of his children. He does not seek information about his children, he has no interest in knowing about the condition of his children, such as how his character develops, how his social relationships are, how his academic skills are, how capable he is of coping with the dynamics of life, whether he needs help from his parents. These parents tend to face unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol abuse, drugs or even mental health problems such as depression, childhood trauma, etc. These behaviors come as a result of a monotonous and uninteresting life where the only thing they can do is their work and activities that do not require much energy. As a result, the child will have a future full of difficulties that he will have to face on his own and other problems such as mental health, anxiety, depression, etc.

Authoritarian dimension of the parenting style:

Authoritarian parenting uses strict rules, high standards and punishment to regulate the child's behavior (MC press, 2023). This type of parent is very different from other styles because these parents have very high expectations for their children and want them to grow up the right way, as they think a child should grow up. Authoritarian parents have a strong character and do not allow children to go outside the framework of the way they have taught them to behave. These parents criticize their children a lot and do not let them be free to fulfill at least some basic rights such as playing with friends which is very limited, expressing free speech and if they express an opinion they will be judged or punished by the parents.

Authoritarian dimension of the parenting style:

An authoritarian parenting style involves high parental demand accompanied by responsiveness. In other words, a parent provides a nurturing and warm environment by setting limits (Choosing therapy, 2023). This is the style of the parent who sets rules but also knows what the children's rights are, their desires, also to make the distinction between desires that must be fulfilled which are called needs and desires that can be discussed and to establish an agreement that does not harm either party. These parents are tolerant and authoritarian where necessary, establishing a well-thought-out balance. It is the ideal parent who uses the healthiest forms to raise their children.

Gender Roles of Parents

According to studies, there is a difference between the way mothers care for their children compared to fathers. Research shows that the gender of the parent plays an important role in the way they spread their beliefs to children. A study conducted by Hillary Paul Halpern and Maureen Perry-Jenkins (2015), where 346 children participated, concluded that the gender role of the father was directed more towards sons than towards daughters. Traditional fathers had their own cultural beliefs about how they should raise their children. In a study of 134 Israeli children, it was shown that fathers have greater ideological agreement with sons than with daughters. This shows that fathers transmit their beliefs more to sons. Usually in most families, fathers and sons have a stronger bond with each other when the child grows up than with the daughter. The mother is the one who communicates with the daughter and gives her advice. Given that they are the same gender, they understand each other better than the opposite gender (Hillary Paul Halpern and Maureen Perry-Jenkins, 2015). In another study conducted, where 158 mothers and their children participated, it was found that mothers contributed equally to their children. So they did not have gender divisions

for their children. Mothers treated their children equally, every belief they had they transmitted to their children equally. Based on the studies conducted, it is concluded that the gender roles of parents have different impacts on their children. Mothers are more predisposed to give more care to their children, while fathers focus more on creating good conditions for the family.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is the degree to which the qualities and characteristics of one's self-concept are seen as positive or negative. Self-concept or self-image has great significance for the individual. The way they see themselves also says a lot about their mental state. Being self-satisfied is an important aspect of an individual's well-being. Individuals who have a high level of self-esteem also have good mental health. On the other hand, individuals with low self-esteem have invalid feelings and needs which are usually symptoms of depression. (APA dictionary, 2024). The social relationships that people create are difficult and often sacrifice themselves to maintain their relationship as consolidated as possible. But suppressing your feelings and thoughts in order not to hurt the other brings later consequences to the person himself but also to the relationship.

Abraham Maslow's Theory of Self-Esteem

According to Abraham Maslow (verywellmind,2024) who was an American psychologist who developed a hierarchy of human needs to explain human motivation. His theory suggests that people have a series of needs that they place in a hierarchy, the one that has the greatest weight is realized first. Maslow classifies the needs for esteem into two major categories. The first is self-esteem which includes dignity, achievements, independence and the second is the desire for reputation or respect from others which includes status, prestige, etc. (Simplypsychology, 2024). Maslow says that among other needs, an individual also has the need for esteem which can come from oneself but also from others in interpersonal relationships. The need for appreciation is inevitable and makes the individual see abilities or achievements in themselves, have confidence in themselves that they can face many difficulties in life, and not give up at the first defeat.

The impact of parenting styles on self-esteem

According to Michele Burch Reid (2017) parenting styles affect the self-esteem of the individual and have direct effects on the individual's adjustment and self-image for themselves. Studies show that high self-esteem, good social skills, low levels of aggressive behavior are associated with the authoritative parenting style. On the other hand, the authoritarian style can cause children to have feelings of inferiority,

pronounced lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, nervous, conflicted. Lack of love, pressure exerted by parents, strictly enforced rules indicate a low self-control and self-esteem of the child. The authoritative parenting style, where tolerance with limits, love, dedication, support, encouragement, etc. prevails, makes the child independent, autonomous and strong to face the dynamics of life with intelligence and perseverance. The family is the main factor in the development of the individual's self-esteem. Authoritative parents produce children who are socially developed and manage to find the right ways to cope with dynamics and who have high self-esteem. On the other hand, authoritarian parents create children with low self-esteem and are very skeptical about their abilities (Maria Ashraf Malik, 2016).

Parenting styles and self-esteem in the Albanian context

Albanian parents, unlike other countries, use their own ways to raise their children. They tend to be more concise and regular with them. According to data from UNICEF (2024), parents and children in Albania have a not very good relationship. They emphasize that the burdens such as psychological, economic, etc. cause them to not focus much on their children but to be neglectful towards them. They spend most of their time holding phones in their hands and in order not to take responsibility for their children, they give them phones to spend a significant amount of time during the day. Mostly 50% of Albanian parents are not aware of the negative effects of the internet. From research conducted by UNICEF, it is shown that Albanian parents do not pay much attention to their children and do not spend much time with them.

Data from PAX: According to another report from PAX.org (2024) which has made a short report on how Albanian families function. Albanian families are composed of parents and children but there may be other generations living together. The way parents behave with their children is more concrete. Due to the division of roles where the father is the main one and the one who makes the final decision and the mother who played the role of the caregiver and has a more open influence with the children. Both roles should be highly respected by the children and what they convey to the children should be listened to. Usually Albanian parents like their children to focus more on academics and have very good results in school, otherwise different types of punishment work. In Albania there is a big division between boys and girls. The boy is seen as the child with more priorities and freedom while the girl is based on morality and honesty although it varies based on the family. Parents encourage their children to make responsible decisions and not make big mistakes that can break the trust and morals of the society. Albanian parents tend to be a breed that follows certain beliefs in the way a child is raised. They want their child to be the best and not to engage in unhealthy behaviors.

These can be called strict and rule-based parents, who teach their children the way they want and if the child does not accept they do not compromise. According to them, the child must be orderly and as a result they may behave coldly with them to teach them the values and norms of Albanian society.

Methodology

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to show that parenting styles have an impact on the self-esteem of the child. Different parenting styles can have different impacts on the self-esteem of their children. The objectives that we aim to highlight during this study are:

1. The way in which different parenting styles affect children;
2. The impact of gender roles on the self-esteem of the child;
3. Parenting styles in Albania and how they affect the self-esteem of the child.

Research question

How are the dimensions of parenting styles related to the self-esteem of the individual? Are the parenting styles of the mother and the father equally important in terms of impact on self-esteem?

Basic hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Parenting styles of mothers and fathers are related to children's self-esteem

Subhypothesis 1: The authoritative dimension and the permissive dimension of parenting style are related to high self-esteem in children.

Subhypothesis 2: The authoritative dimension of parenting style is related to low self-esteem in children.

Hypothesis 0: Dimensions of parenting styles are NOT related to self-esteem;

Hypothesis 2: The relationships between parenting styles and self-esteem differ based on the gender of the parent (mother or father).

Hypothesis 0: The relationships between parenting styles and self-esteem do NOT differ based on the gender of the parent (mother or father).

Study variables

- Dependent variable: Self-esteem of the individual.
- Independent variable: Parenting styles.

Methodology

This is a quantitative study because through this method data will be obtained empirically, that is, through questionnaires. Considering that we want to measure the level of self-esteem caused by parents, two types of tests will be used. The first test is for parenting styles and the other test is for the self-esteem of their children.

Study participants

Considering that the self-esteem of the individual will be measured based on parenting styles, the participants who participated are their children. The age of the sample ranges from 18 to 45 years old where individuals have created their character and know themselves well. The gender consists of 103 females and 13 males. This study was conducted using the online questionnaire google form. Participants were voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire was distributed to a wide population of males and females from different parts of Albania. The questionnaire was requested to be re-submitted by different people who have close people who could be suitable for this study. It is possible that male participants showed less interest in completing the questionnaire, as topics related to parenting and emotional development are often perceived as more relevant to mothers. Another possible explanation is that male participants had limited availability or time to complete the survey due to work-related commitments. The survey was mainly distributed through school communication channels, where mothers are typically more active, which may have limited male participation. And the final argument is that social expectations may discourage men from discussing parenting practices or emotional aspects openly, leading to lower participation. Most of the participants in the study were single children, 40%. Most of the participants in the study reported that they are satisfied with their financial situation, exactly 43%.

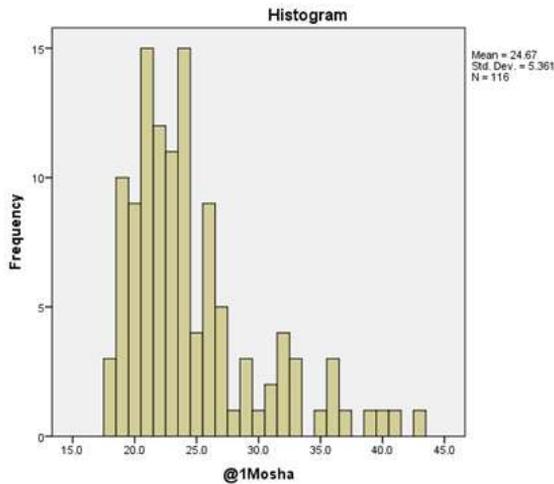
TABLE 1. Descriptive analysis of gender. @2Gender

		Frequencies	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	Female	103	88.0	88.8	88.8
	Male	13	11.1	11.2	100.0
	Total	116	99.1	100.0	

Absence		1	.9		
Total		117	100.0		

A total of 116 individuals participated in this study, of whom 103 were female (88%) and 13 were male (11.1%). As shown in the table above, the majority of participants were female.

GRAPH 1. Final age analysis



This study involved 116 individuals, aged (18 to 43). The largest number, based on the results of the graph, is in the age group (21 to 24). While the rest have an approximately uniform distribution.

TABLE 2. Final analysis of the educational level of parents.
@4What is your parent's educational level?

		Frequencies	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	8-year	27	23.1	23.3	23.3
	Middle	43	36.8	37.1	60.3
	Hight	45	38.5	38.8	99.1
	Vocational school	1	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	116	99.1	100.0	
Absence		1	.9		
Total		117	100.0		

In this study, it results that the educational level of the parents is divided in the following way: 27 people have completed eight year education; 43 people have

completed secondary education; 45 people hold a higher education degree and only 1 person has attended a vocational school. As shown in the table above, the educational level with the highest values and percentages is higher education. The average educational level is 2.17 and the standard deviation is 0.7. The fact that most parents have higher education can be justified by the fact that most of the sample of this study belongs to the age of 21-24. It appears that parents in this age group belong to a recent post-dictatorship and beyond.

TABLE 3. Final analysis of the number of children.
@3How many children are there in your family?

		Frequencies	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Validity	0	7	6.0	6.0	6.0
	1	47	40.2	40.5	46.6
	2	44	37.6	37.9	84.5
	3	11	9.4	9.5	94.0
	4	5	4.3	4.3	98.3
	5	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	116	99.1	100.0	
Absence		1	.9		
Total		117	100.0		

In this study, from the table shown for the number of children, the highest value is for families with 1 child, which is exactly (40.2%), and the lowest value is for families with 5 children, (1.7%). These values coincide with Albanian families, which, based on the age of the children, result in parents being more focused on their careers than on the fact that they should have an extended family.

TABLE 4. Final analysis of financial situation.
@5How satisfied are you with your financial situation?

		Frequencies	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	Very satisfied	12	10.3	10.3	10.3
	Satisfied	51	43.6	44.0	54.3
	Neutral	41	35.0	35.3	89.7
	Not satisfied	10	8.5	8.6	98.3
	Not at all satisfied	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Total	116	99.1	100.0	
Absence		1	.9		
Total		117	100.0		

In this study, which is composed of 116 people, regarding the financial situation, 12 people, or (10.3%), report that they are very satisfied, 51 people, or (43.6%), report that they are satisfied, 41 people, or (35%), report that they are neutral, 10 people, or (8.5%), report that they are not satisfied, and 2 people, or (1.7%), report that they are not at all satisfied. The average financial situation level is 2.47 and the standard deviation is 0.8.

Instruments

Two types of tests will be used for our study, one is to measure parenting styles and the other to measure the child's self-esteem. The questionnaires used in the study are standardized, where to measure parenting styles we have the PAQ test which is a test created by John P. Burin in 1989. This test measures three parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive and authoritative (Psychologyroots,2023). The test consists of 30 statements, where 10 statements correspond to each parenting dimension. The statements shown are statements about the parent's behavior, the respondent is asked to evaluate each statement about their parents. The PAQ test has been widely used to show the impact of parenting styles on child development. Research has shown that the Authoritative parent is the most useful style, as it is a combination of the Authoritative and Permissive parent. Children who have authoritative parents tend to be more successful, have high self-esteem, etc. The PAQ is also used by clinicians to identify the type of parent and to make changes in the way parents should behave with their children. A therapist helps the parent understand the meaning of each parenting style and the impact they have on their children. The therapist should also help the parent develop more effective parenting skills. The PAQ can be administered in a group or individually. The questionnaire is given individually to the individual who completes the statements according to their opinion. After all 30 statements are surveyed, the points of each parenting style are seen. The higher their score, the more their parents' parenting style matches that parenting style. During the administration of this questionnaire, it is suggested to take into consideration: an environment that is as comfortable as possible for the person who will give the contribution. Considering that we want to collect the most truthful data possible, it is necessary for individuals to be in an environment where they are not frustrated and can freely give their opinion. Also, during data collection, the way in which the questionnaire is used and the ultimate goal must be explained to the individuals first. Before individuals complete the questionnaire, they must have information about what they are contributing to. Another criterion in the questionnaire is the fact that each statement must be completed in order to get the result we want in the end. So there are three types of dimensions of parenting styles: permissive, authoritarian and authoritative. Each of the styles has its own questions, where for the permissive style the statements

that correspond are: 1, 6, 10, 13, 14, 17, 19, 21, 24 and 28; Authoritarian parenting corresponds to statements: 2, 3, 7, 9, 12, 16, 18, 25, 26 and 29; Authoritarian parenting corresponds to statements: 4, 5, 8, 11, 15, 20, 22, 23, 27 and 30. This test has been found to be a reliable and accurate measure of parenting styles over time. Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure. A reliable measure will produce similar results when administered to the same people on different occasions. The PAQ has been shown to be reliable in a number of studies. For example, one study found that the PAQ had a test-retest reliability of 0.86, meaning that the scores of participants who completed the PAQ twice, two weeks apart, were highly correlated. Another study found that the PAQ had good internal consistency, meaning that the PAQ items are well correlated with each other. The Cronbach's alpha for the PAQ was found to be 0.87, which is considered to be good reliability. The Morris Rosenberg test was used to measure self-esteem.

The purpose of the 10-item RSE test is to measure the level of self-esteem of the individual. This test was originally designed to measure the self-esteem of children to adolescents, however, the scale used in the test also indicates the level of self-esteem of adults. Regarding the evaluation of the test, considering that it is a Guttman test, the decision can be a little complicated since we are dealing with a combined evaluation method. The answers with low self-esteem are "disagree" or "strongly disagree" for items 1, 3, 4, 7, 10 and "strongly agree" or "agree" for items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9. Two or three out of three correct answers for items 3, 7 and 9 are evaluated as one item. One or two out of two correct answers for items 4 and 5 are considered as a single item; items 1, 8 and 10 are evaluated as individual items; and combined correct responses (one or two out of two) to items 2 and 6 are considered to be a single item. The scale can also be assessed by summing the 4 individual item scores after rating the negatively worded items. The reliability of the RSE is the fact that it demonstrates a Guttman scale reproducibility coefficient of .92, indicating excellent internal consistency. Test-retest reliability over a 2-week period reveals correlations of .85 and .88, indicating excellent stability. The validity of this test is concurrent, predictive, and construct using known groups. The RSE correlates significantly with other self-report measures, including the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. Furthermore, the RSE correlates positively with measures of depression and anxiety. (American Psychological Association, 2006).

Data Collection Procedures

To collect data for this study, research was first conducted to find standardized tests to measure parenting styles and self-esteem of individuals. The questionnaires were translated by professionals in the field of translation and then merged using Google Forms to be distributed via a link to the people who matched my study, who were individuals aged 18-45. The link was distributed in different forms to

achieve the collection of data necessary for the study. Each individual, through the link, completes the statements of the questionnaire that match the person.

Limitations

One of the limitations that we may have for our study is that considering that the study is formed in google form and will be distributed to individuals via link and not directly, we may encounter problems of the type: not all are willing to cooperate or individuals may complete part of the questionnaire and interrupt the other part. Another limitation is the fact that the majority of the sample are women.

Chapter IV: Empirical Analysis

Table 1. Descriptive data

From the descriptive analysis performed, it results that for the parenting styles divided into three categories, we have the corresponding values. Where the permissive parenting style for the mother has a minimum value of 10 and a maximum of 40. Their mean is 28 and the standard deviation is 5.1. For the same parenting style, that is, permissive, the corresponding values for the father are a minimum of 10, a maximum of 44, where their mean is 28 and the standard deviation is 5.1. Regarding the authoritarian parenting style, the values obtained for the mother are the minimum corresponding to the value 10, the maximum to the value 43. Their mean is 27 and the standard deviation is 6.6. Regarding the authoritarian parenting style, for the father the minimum value is 10, the maximum is 46. Their average is 28 and the standard deviation is 7. In the third parenting style which coincides with the authoritative one where the values for the mother are the minimum is 10, the maximum value is 49. The calculated average for this parenting style is 35 and the standard deviation is 6.2. For the authoritarian parenting style but for the father the calculated values are the minimum 10, the maximum value 49. Their average is calculated to be 34 and the standard deviation 6.8. In the table above the average and standard deviation of the parenting styles are identified. The data extracted from SPSS show that the authoritative parenting style has the highest average. From the results, the highest authoritative style is in the mother with 35% and the father with 34%, a difference between each other but still shows a higher average than the other parenting styles. Then there is the tolerant parenting style where again the mother results in a more tolerant difference than the father, exactly 28.9% for the mother and 28.6% for the father. At the lowest level is the authoritarian parent, where it is seen that children do not tend to see their parents as authoritarian. However, according to the given

result, it is seen that in this specific case the father is more authoritarian than the mother, where exactly we have 28% for the authoritarian father and 27% for the authoritarian mother. Regarding the standard deviation for the tolerant mother it is 5.1; for the tolerant father it is 5.4. For the authoritarian parent, where the mother has a standard deviation of 6.6 and the father 7.02. The standard deviation for the authoritative mother is 6.6 and for the authoritative father it is 6.8. Regarding self-esteem, the mean of the sample of this study is 27.6207 and the standard deviation is 2.63714.

Descriptive data					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard deviation
Mother permissive dimension	116	10.00	40.00	28.9569	5.12520
Father's permissive dimension	116	10.00	44.00	28.6638	5.47555
Mother authoritarian dimension	116	10.00	43.00	27.5431	6.63507
Father authoritarian dimension	116	10.00	46.00	28.1552	7.02121
Mother authoritative dimension	116	10.00	49.00	35.0517	6.68918
Father authoritative dimension	116	10.00	49.00	34.5000	6.80473
Valid N (listwise)	116				

4.2 TABLE 2. Correlation between self-esteem and individual demographic data.

Correlational relationship							
		Self-esteem	@1Age	@2Gender	@3Number of children	@4Educational level	@5 Financial situation
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	-.198*	-.242**	.010	-.161	-.025
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.033	.009	.916	.085	.786
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116
@1Age	Pearson Correlation	-.198*	1	-.035	-.147	.240**	.138
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.033		.713	.116	.009	.140
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116
@2Gender	Pearson Correlation	-.242**	-.035	1	.105	-.008	.027
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	.713		.262	.929	.776
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116
@3Number of children	Pearson Correlation	.010	-.147	.105	1	-.265**	-.111
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.916	.116	.262		.004	.237
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116

@4 Educational level	Pearson Correlation	-.161	.240**	-.008	-.265**	1	.007
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.085	.009	.929	.004		.944
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116
@5 Financial situation	Pearson Correlation	-.025	.138	.027	-.111	.007	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.786	.140	.776	.237	.944	
	N	116	116	116	116	116	116

Në këtë studim nga analiza e bërë për niveli e vetvlerësimit dhe lidhjen e mundshme korrelacionale me të dhënat demografike rezulton se vetvlerësimi dhe mosha kanë një lidhje negative ku $R = -0,198$ dhe $P < 0.033$. Pra kjo tregon se me rritjen e moshën ulet vetvlerësimi dhe anasjelltas. Në këtë studim nga analiza e bërë për niveli e vetvlerësimit dhe lidhjen korrelacionale me të dhënat demografike rezulton se vetvlerësimi dhe gjinia kanë një lidhje negative ku $R = -0,242$ dhe $P < 0.009$. Pra kjo tregon se femrat kanë vetvlerësim më të lartë se meshkujt.

4.3 TABLE 3: Correlational relationship between self-esteem and the permissive dimension of mother and father.

Correlational relationship				
		Self-esteem	Mother permissive dimension	Father permissive dimension
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	-.321**	-.263**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.004
	N	116	116	116
Mother permissive dimension	Pearson Correlation	-.321**	1	.902**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	116	116	116
Father permissive dimension	Pearson Correlation	-.263**	.902**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.000	
	N	116	116	116

In this study, we note from the above table which was calculated by the SPSS program that there is a correlation between self-esteem and the permissive dimension of the mother's parenting style. This is a negative relationship, where $R = -0.321$ and $P < 0.001$. This shows that the more permissive the mother is, the lower the self-esteem in the children. We also see a relationship between self-esteem and the father's permissive parenting style, with values respectively $R = -0.263$ and $P < 0.004$. This shows the same relationship with the mother's calculation. So the more permissive the father is, the lower the self-esteem of the children.

4.4 TABLE 4: Correlational relationship between self-esteem and the authoritarian dimension of mother and father.

Correlational relationship				
		Self-esteem	Mother authoritarian dimension	Father authoritarian dimension
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	-.066	-.056
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.479	.554
	N	116	116	116
Mother authoritarian dimension	Pearson Correlation	-.066	1	.910**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.479		.000
	N	116	116	116
Father authoritarian dimension	Pearson Correlation	-.056	.910**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.554	.000	
	N	116	116	116

In this study, we want to see if there is a relationship first between self-esteem and parenting styles and then the type of relationship. From the data extracted from the table which was calculated with the SPSS program, it results that the authoritarian parenting style of mom and dad has no correlation with self-esteem.

4.5 TABLE 5: Correlation between self-esteem and the authoritative dimension of mother and father.

Correlation relationship				
		Self-esteem	Mother authoritative dimension	Father authoritative dimension
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.179*	.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.050	.119
	N	116	116	116
Mother authoritative dimension	Pearson Correlation	.179*	1	.893**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.050		.000
	N	116	116	116
Father authoritative dimension	Pearson Correlation	.145	.893**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.119	.000	
	N	116	116	116

In this study, the relationship between parenting styles and self-esteem should be shown. From the table shown above, which was calculated by the SPSS program, it was found that there is a borderline significant relationship between the mother's authoritative parenting style and self-esteem, $R = .179$ and $P < 0.50$.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that this paper, which aimed to study the relationship between self-esteem and dimensions of parenting styles, has produced these results in relation to the hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

The parenting styles of the mother and father are related to the self-esteem of children. This hypothesis, according to the data extracted from the analysis made with the SPSS program, is partially confirmed. Based on the studies conducted according to Michele Burch Reid (2017), the family is the main factor that creates the self-esteem of the individual. Parents influence their ways of spreading beliefs to children, on their self-esteem. But in the study conducted in the Albanian context, out of the three dimensions of parenting styles, the permissive and authoritative dimension have a correlational and significant relationship with the self-esteem of children. The authoritative dimension has not shown a correlational relationship with the self-esteem of children.

Hypothesis 2

The links between parenting styles and self-esteem differ based on the gender of the parent (mother or father).

Based on the data of the analysis, which show gender differences in parents and the ways in which they raise their children, this hypothesis is partially confirmed, since in the Albanian context only the authoritative dimension of the mother has shown a borderline significant relationship with self-esteem. Based on a study conducted, it results that Albanian women rank first in Europe for taking care of their children. In the “Quality of Life Survey” conducted by the European Commission, 84% of Albanian women responded that they took care of their children. While another 15% took care of them with the help of their spouse (Koha, 2022). Albanian mothers take more care of their children, while fathers focus more on the fact that they need to take care of the financial aspects, in order to be able to meet all the conditions for their children.

A study by Hillary Paul Halpern and Maureen Perry-Jenkins (2015) concluded that the gender role of fathers was more directed towards sons than towards daughters. Traditional fathers had their own cultural beliefs about how to raise their children. Fathers had a greater connection with sons than with daughters. They raised sons based on their own ideals. Here we can also say that different

cultures have an influence. Many cultures raise their sons as a typical example of a father while daughters as an example of their mother. The communication that fathers have with their sons is different from that of daughters. They try to raise them with the idea of being independent. Mothers on the other hand do not make a division between children. They have the same way of treating children. The rules they set are the same for their children, regardless of the gender of the children. Although the relationship with the girl may be different from the boys, since within the gender they have the same ideals, they choose to raise their children in the same way. Generally, mothers are the ones who devote more time to their children, since fathers are more focused on material goods. As a result, mothers, considering that they spend more time with their children, the methods they use are the same. If the boy is punished, the same will be for the girl if we are dealing with making a mistake. The opposite if we are dealing with a good action is the reward.

Subhypothesis 1

The authoritative and permissive dimensions of parenting style are associated with high self-esteem in children.

The permissive dimension of mother and father parenting styles increases the self-esteem of the individual is not confirmed. This is because the results of the sample of this study show a negative correlation between them. This means that the more permissive the parents are, the lower the self-esteem. Being a sample that has reported that parents have mainly an authoritative style (the highest average of all dimensions), the difference is made only in the increase of the permissive dimension. So those children who have parents who use mainly an authoritative style but also show tendencies to use a permissive style, have children with lower self-esteem. It can be assumed that the low level of control, characteristic of the permissive style, can transmit a negative message: “you don’t control me, I don’t care about you”, which is inconsistent (applies in some cases but not others). To support this correlation, several international studies come to our aid, which show that if parents are too permissive with their children, then the children will have lower self-esteem (Bay area CBT Center, 2023). Another reason is the fact that parents focus on their work and career, to grow personally and professionally and leave aside the responsibilities they have towards their family. According to Stewart D. Friedman (2018), according to research, a negative impact on children’s mental health is shown by the fact that parents devote more time to their work. In a study conducted by Rakel Guðjónsdóttir (2023), she emphasizes that a child raised with permissive parents has a lower level of self-esteem and this is due to the lack of discipline and an authoritarian figure. All these studies support the result of this paper, which shows that the permissive dimension of parenting styles affects the

reduction of the child's self-esteem and as a result, the sub-hypothesis has not been proven. Regarding the authoritative dimension of parenting styles, from the descriptive data, the authoritative dimension had the highest average. This shows that our sample has an authoritative dimension of parenting styles, which also based on many studies shows that the best way to raise children is by striking a balance between authority and permissiveness. According to Katherine Lee (2020) who has written about the Authoritative dimension of parenting styles. She says that this dimension is appropriate for treating children. For this paper, during the analysis carried out, a significant relationship was found between the authoritative dimension of the mother and self-esteem. As a result, the sub-hypothesis for the authoritative dimension was confirmed. Authoritative mothering is associated with increased self-esteem of individuals. This also shows the gender difference between mother and father. Based on a study, it results that Albanian women rank first in Europe for caring for their children. In the "Quality of Life Survey" conducted by the European Commission, 84% of Albanian women responded that they took care of their children. While another 15% took care of them with the help of their husband (Koha, 2022). Albanian mothers take more care of their children, while fathers focus more on the fact that they need to take care of the financial aspects, so that they can meet all the conditions for their children.

Subhypothesis 2

The authoritarian dimension of parenting style is associated with low self-esteem in children. This subhypothesis is not confirmed since in this study from the data extracted from the results of the SPSS program we see that there is no connection between these two correlations. This may be due to the fact that children do not see their parents today as authoritarian. They do not want to accept the fact that they have to build their lives with strict rules. In a study conducted in the Albanian context by Brunilda Laboviti (2015), it is shown that Albanian children are not supporters of the authoritarian dimension of parenting styles. This is because they are deprived of many rights. Most Albanian children do not experiment much with their lives because of the authoritarian families they have. This means that this dimension of parenting is not preferred for them. This is also shown by the descriptive data where the authoritarian dimension has the lowest average. This explanation is also supported by the fact that the authoritarian parenting style, on the contrary, has no negative effect in the context of authoritative parenting; the correlation was not statistically significant. Therefore, excessive control in this dimension is moderated by the emotional connection with the parent characteristic of the authoritative style, which is dominant in the study sample. However, this explanation remains at a hypothetical level and further studies should be carried out to verify whether the level of perceived control is in fact the factor that makes the difference.

Implications

What can parents, teachers, psychologists, and educational politics learn?

As the results of the study show, the style with the highest percentage chosen by the participants is the authoritative one. This style is recommended to be used more by parents as it has all the components to be the right one. The authoritative style teaches children how to grow up healthy with rules, love and care. It is a combination of the permissive and the authoritarian parent, where essential elements are taken to raise children in the right way. This style helps not only parents but also teachers at school. They learn how to treat students in the right way by teaching them how to behave with themselves and others. not to be arrogant and individualistic but to be careful and smart. They learn how to increase their self-esteem when they feel incapable of doing a certain task. By speaking to them in the right way, the child becomes stronger and feels more capable of facing the difficulty and resolving it. Why are parenting styles important in psychology? The parent-child interaction and the transmission of family rules and values, as well as parents support and guidance, can positively impact children's ability of social adaption, a suitable parenting style could nurture children's self-esteem, confidence, and social ability.

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