Exploring General Education Teachers' Perceptions of Pupils with Learning Difficulties: A Qualitative Approach

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Pupils with learning difficulties attending general classes face a plethora of thorny situations both during their learning processes and socialization. General education teachers are to support and actively engage pupils with learning difficulties in classroom settings by employing a range of teaching strategies, while they, sometimes, face difficulties to this end. The qualitative research presented in this article aims to explore general education teachers' perceptions regarding pupils with learning difficulties. Under this rationale, 21 General education teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, focusing on their perceptions regarding education and treatment of learning difficulties. The study data suggest that participants recognize certain features as far as it concerns the causes of learning difficulties and highlight their potential actions during the teaching process even though they sometimes feel unprepared to facilitate this aim. They, also, emphasize the need for communication between all school agents as well as appropriate teaching means and infrastructure as determining factors for their educational work when it comes to pupils with learning difficulties. Further, implications are offered for the necessary actions that need to be taken for General education teachers' better preparation and support, namely a scientific network of psychologists and school counselors as well as the need for in-service professional development.

Introduction

Education professionals, researchers, but also parents face difficulties in defining the concept of "learning difficulties" (LD). American Psychiatric Association published a modern definition of the term in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th Ed., DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to DSM-V, special LD can be

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diagnosed as a specific learning disorder, which is related to difficulties pupils face in reading, writing as well as mathematical skills while they attend classes of formal education. In detail, a series of characteristics referring to LD may include inaccurate or arduous reading, poor written expression as well as poor numerical data retrieval. Pupils' academic performance may, also, be below average. These special learning disorders can be diagnosed by (a) reviewing a pupil's developmental, medical, educational, and family record; (b) test scores, and teacher observations and (c) a pupil's response to academic interventions.

Research data have identified neurological dysfunction as an important cause of LD. This can be traced with the use of magnetic resonance imaging, functional magnetic resonance spectroscopy and other modern neuroimaging techniques (Peterson & Pennington, 2015). In addition, hereditary factors appear to be the cause of LD; from a parent with LD to their child in less than 50% (Pennington, 1990; Schulte-Körne et al., 2006). Children born prematurely may have increased rates of LD (Quigley et al., 2012). Additionally, research data suggest (Evens et al., 2015; Lanphear et al., 2000) that lead, which is present in fuel, water, paints and toys, may be related to the occurrence of LD and intellectual disability as well. The LD occurrence may also be attributed to environmental factors, as the dysfunctional family environment mainly determined by inappropriate parenting practices, but also to school (the teaching methods, the teacher's style, etc.) (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Lerner & Johns, 2009; Manning, Bear & Minke, 2006; Mercer & Pullen, 2009).

Heterogeneity is a particular feature of pupils with LD. Therefore, some children have problems with reading or spelling, while others with math and attention. Besides the differences that exist between pupils with LD (individual differences), there are, also, differentiations in the abilities that children themselves may have (intrapersonal differences). For example, a pupil may face difficulties in reading but be at a better level in math. Heterogeneity as well as intrapersonal differences are an important cause of problems for the implementation of educational programs for pupils with LD (Hallahan, Kauffman & Pullen, 2015).

In Greece, the special education law (2817/2000), but also the later one (3699/2008) were two crucial steps in the direction of supporting pupils with LD. These shed light to the needs of children with LD and suggested ways to support them. As these laws were adapted to international standards and decisions, they brought significant changes in the field of Special Education, emphasizing the need for general education teachers' further training, the increase in the number of special classes, the creation of diagnostic services as well as the implementation of a type of co-teaching named "parallel support" (Mavropalias, 2019). Co-teaching is a specific approach which includes service offered as a result of the cooperation between two professionals (Friend, 2021; Solis et al., 2012). A general education teacher works cooperatively with a special education teacher to organize the teaching process for a heterogenous group of pupils with and without disabilities in the same class (Friend, 2021; Mavropalias, Anastasiou & Koran, 2023).

Pupils with LD attending general classes usually face a range of cognitive and emotional difficulties arising from academic failure, which, in their turn, lead to diminishing motivation, peer acceptance and active engagement in classroom settings (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010). Pupils with LD are commonly confronted with issues of social rejection either in their relationship with their classmates or their teachers and a negative 'academic self-concept', while they simultaneously perceive classroom climate as unfavorable to them (Krull, Wilbert, & Hennemann, 2014, p. 172).

The role that General education teachers (GETs) hold when they work with pupils with LD is of major importance. For example, to achieve a cognitive aim for a pupil with LD, they have to follow a different path from the one they would have selected for the rest of the pupils (Tomlinson, 2005, p.28). Pupils with LD are entitled to the human right of inclusive education, according to General Comment Number 4 in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2016). This information stands as an important reason for the adjustments that must be followed by GETs during the teaching process. Individualized and special teaching approaches to cognitive subjects (reading, spelling, mathematics, and alike) are also needed to deal with learning problems and to improve academic performance (cognitive training) and metacognitive training (Hallahan et al., 2005; Mavropalias & Andronidi, 2017; Schiff et al., 2017; Pullen & Hallahan, 2015)

Focusing on GETs' role, their collaboration in the workplace is considered to be an important factor contributing to their professional development, while it simultaneously promotes cooperative approaches in meeting demanding, educational challenges as well as reflection (Hindin et al., 2007). Even though GETs seem to be informed about the benefits of collaboration in the workplace, they, also, seem to highlight difficulties and restrictions that inhibit their disposition to collaborate. These are usually attributed to issues related to school organizational culture or others namely, time or strict school regime as well as difficulties arising from professional individualistic culture (Forte & Flores, 2014). GETs' learning can be enhanced in school settings through collaboration with other teachers at either a one-to-one or small-group level (Imants & van Veen, 2010). Therefore, it is understood that GETs can particularly benefit from their interaction with special education teachers in the direction of better supporting pupils with LD. In general classes with a presence of Special Education Teacher (co-teachers) along with a GET, the ability to involve co-teachers in cooperative actions, as well as a detailed description of each teacher's role in the class are important issues of co-teaching. A strained collaborative relationship between co-teachers can negatively affect students with LD as well as their peers (Friend & Cook, 2013; Mavropalias & Anastasiou, 2016; McCormick et al., 2001).

Furthermore, GETs' cooperation with the parents of pupils with LD is particularly important. Teaching models can only succeed if GETs and parents communicate effectively. However, this field may include a range of difficulties. On the one hand, parents must deal with the pressure and difficulties arising from caring for their child with LD (Sileo & Prater, 2012). On the other hand, GETs may feel disappointed, feeling that they do not get all the information that they need from the parents. Additionally, schools that are not "friendly" to parents pose serious barriers to communication a priori (Kauffman et al., 2011).

In line with the above, GETs confront with plenty of difficulties and questions when they have to approach pupils with LD. This is why fruitful collaboration with other colleagues as well as formal learning through courses aiming at their professional development seem to significantly contribute to covering their needs (Jones & Riley, 2017).This is where the issue of co-teaching reappears since both professionals should be willing to work together, share responsibility regarding planning and provide feedback to each other for their practices (Rytivaara et al., 2019; Strogilos et al., 2023). Furthermore, contemporary technology offers applications which are adaptable and tailor-made to pupils' needs through platforms that can even be customized by teachers so that pupils with LD can be supported in the direction of enhancing cognition (Fernández-López et al., 2013). In that way, it can be assumed that GETs' needs expand to a wide spectrum which involves both their professional development and the existence of modern equipment and facilities.

Method

Research aim and questions

The qualitative research presented in this article aims at tracing Northern Greece primary school GETs' perceptions regarding: (a) pupils' LD and (b) the educational support which pupils with LD need. GETs' perceptions may offer information regarding the conditions that pupils with LD face in school settings and they can, also, indicate the needs that should be covered in the field of Special Education. Especially in Greece, a mismatch seems to exist between the official policies in Special Education and the practical implementation in practice. Therefore, GETs' ideas for this issue may shed light to problems or oversights (Mavropalias, Alevriadou & Rachanioti, 2021). Under this rationale, the following research questions were posed:

- How do GETs perceive LD causes?
- What are the practices that GETs use for the academic support of pupils with LD?
- To what extent do GETs communicate with the school community agents regarding pupils with LD?
- What are GETs' needs for the most effective support of the pupils with LD in the general class?

Study participants

Twenty-one primary school GETs from Northern Greece participated in the study. Initially, 36 GETs were invited for participation but 21 (58.3%) responded positively; 18(85.7%) of whom were women and three (14.3%) men. The mean age of the participants was 43.3 years, and their mean educational service was 16 years. Out of the 21 GETs-participants, 13 (61.9%) stated that they have been trained for LD through up to forty-hour seminars, five (23.8%) through LD seminars of 500 hours, while three (14.3%) had no training for LD. Three (14.2%) GETs had a Master degree.

The mean number of pupils in the class was 16, their mean age was 9.3, while the mean number of pupils with LD was 1.6 per class. Out of the 34 pupils diagnosed with LD, 23 (67.7%) did not receive special education services, whereas 11 (32.3%) were assisted either through their participation in a Special Class (SC) (9 pupils, 81.2 %) or through co-teaching (2 pupils, 18.1%).

Detailed information about the teachers-participants is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Study participants

N	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experience	Class	Years of teaching in the class	Number of pupils in the class	Number of pupils with LD in the class	Special Education Services
1	F*	50	22	3rd	2	19	1	SC: 6 hours per week
2	F	48	11	4th	1	22	2	Co- teaching
3	F	36	13	5th	3	24	2	Not available
4	M**	52	30	6th	3	16	1	Not available
5	F	50	19	6th	2	18	3	SC: 8 hours per week (for one student)
6	F	50	21	5th	2	22	2	Not available
7	F	35	4	4th	3	24	2	SC: 4 hours per week
8	F	38	9	2nd	2	12	1	Not available
9	F	43	15	3rd	3	17	2	Not available
10	F	55	32	3rd	2	9	1	SC: 5 hours per week
11	F	34	6	5th	1	23	1	Not available
12	M	30	2	4th	1	21	1	Not available
13	F	29	1	5th	1	17	3	SC: 6 hours per week (for two students)
14	F	45	16	5th	3	14	2	Not available
15	F	52	28	2nd	2	20	2	Not available
16	F	38	10	3rd	2	18	1	Not available
17	F	40	11	5th	3	10	2	Not available
18	F	29	2	2nd	2	25	1	SC: 6 hours per week
19	F	56	33	5th	1	21	1	SC: 10 hours per week
20	F	52	31	5th	2	17	1	Not available
21	F	47	20	6th	2	20	2	Not available

Data collection and procedure

Semi-structured interviews

In order to collect the data for the qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were selected. The interviews were individually conducted through a face-to-face approach. Semi-structured interviews were selected since it was considered that direct contact with participants would enhance tracing in comparison to the use of a questionnaire. Even though semi-structured interviews are sometimes considered to be influenced by the researchers' personal beliefs, they are generally accepted as a means of data collection (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The interviews were carried out from January to February 2018 and descriptive data were collected, so a coding system could be organized for analysis (Creswell, 2009).

Initially, the researcher communicated with the school units' principals through telephone to inform them for the research aim and the interview process. Then, after principals' verbal permission was granted, the researcher communicated with the school teachers through telephone, so that they could also be informed about the research aim and the interview process. Since teachers agreed to participate in the interview process, the researcher visited schools to meet GETs in person and cultivate a trust climate between the interviewer and the

interviewee in order to safeguard the success of the interview (Willig, 2008). Finally, the day and time of each interview were scheduled. A day before the interview, the researcher reminded the GETs-participants of their appointment through telephone.

The interviews were conducted individually and in places that were mutually agreed between the researcher and the GET. Specifically, 21 interviews were carried out at the school after school schedule. All interviews were recorded with "Audacity version 1.3" software through a laptop. At the same time, the researcher kept notes in a diary. Each interview lasted about 40 minutes. In order to maintain research ethics and to ensure confidentiality, the names and personal data of pupils and teachers were not mentioned.

The interview protocol

The interview of the present research included 28 questions that focused on four axes: (a) the causes of LD, (b) the cognitive, social, and emotional profile of pupils with LD, (c) educational support methods, (d) issues of teachers' communication with parents, (e) teachers' needs. Additionally, information regarding GETs' demographics (gender, age, educational background, years of service in the school they teach, training) and data of their class (total number of pupils in the class, number of pupils with LD) were included in the interview process. It should be noted that a pilot interview with two GETs was, also, carried out, which indicated that the questions included in it were understandable.

Coding procedure

GETs' interviews were transcribed and recorded verbatim. The authors cross-checked the recordings to avoid transcription errors and then together read the interview texts multiple times to get familiarized with the data and to identify a coding system for their analysis (Creswell, 2009). Initially, data from the interview recordings were organized into codes, then grouped into categories and finally into themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). They worked together to form codes for fifteen interviews. When they reached an agreement at a rate of 85% on the codes, they independently coded the remaining six interviews, through content analysis. In the next step of the analysis, disagreements over coding differences were mutually resolved (Klassen & Lynch, 2007).

Data analysis process

Initially, in each interview file, five a priori codes based on the axes included in the interview (causes of LD, cognitive, social and emotional profile of pupils with LD, educational support methods, teachers' communication issues with parents and teachers' needs) were identified. This initial code list was transformed and expanded as inductive codes and categories appeared in various categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Finally, the analysis led to the organization of four basic themes: (a) GETs' perceptions of LD, (b) support practices for pupils with LD, (c) communication, and (d) teacher'sneeds. In detail, the first theme included two categories and six codes; the second theme two categories; the third theme five categories and the fourth theme seven categories.

During the analysis process, the authors initially worked separately, then together, and revisited the data several times to achieve maximum consistency and reliability. Finally, the first author presented a first report of the interview data to a group of four teachers who participated in the interview. They discussed the data in a 60-minute session looking for rival

themes and explanations. The teachers did not dispute our findings and interpretations. The above test was used to safeguard the reliability and validity of qualitative findings (Creswell, 2009; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Study Results

From the qualitative analysis of the interview data, four themes emerged. Each theme is presented separately in the following section. It should be noted that after each participant's quote F stands as to connote a female participant, while M a male one.

GETs' perceptions of LD

Cognitive and socio-emotional characteristics of pupils with LD
Cognitive characteristics of pupils with LD

Twenty GETs referred to the cognitive characteristics of pupils with LD. Fifteen GETs referred to problems regarding writing production. They pointed out that pupils with LD make syntax, content and meaning mistakes. Participant 4 stated: *"They make too many spelling mistakes, incomplete sentences, from which no specific meaning can be deduced. It is unthinkable for them to form paragraphs"* (M4). In addition, five GETs reported problems with syllable permutation, skipping words, letter identification, spelling and copying mistakes. All GETs (21) interviewed reported pupils' difficulties in reading. In particular, 17 GETs referred to slow reading: *"Even though my pupil is in the 5th grade, he reads very slowly. This probably reminds me of a pupil who is at the beginning of the 3rd class of primary school"* (F7). Also, all GETs-participants stated that pupils with LD face difficulties in understanding a text: *"Reading difficulty makes it difficult for them to understand the sentence and the text"* (F3) and six of them referred to difficulties in mathematics: *"Solving a simple math problem with addition and subtraction is a difficult task"* (F2).

Social and emotional characteristics of pupils with LD

All GETs reported that pupils with LD face social and emotional problems. The characteristics that GETs identified in these pupils are the following: withdrawal, isolation, sensitivity, reservation, shame, low self-esteem and self-confidence, fear of rejection, refusal to attend school as well as aggressiveness. For example, Participant 8 stated: *"Nikos often tells me that he does not like coming to school, because he does not understand anything and everyone treats him with hostility"* (F8), while Participant 2 referred to violent behaviour: *"Quite often, my pupil violently harasses many of his classmates"* (F2).

Causes of LD
Biological factors

Twelve GETs commented on the causes to which they attribute LD. Eight referred to biological factors, while four linked LD to family environment. Participant 16 stated: *"Both of my pupils were born with LD and will have them for the rest of their lives"* (F16).

GETs' teaching style and LD

Sixteen GETs stated that inappropriate teaching methodologies may deteriorate these pupils' condition. In this light, they commented on their role, which is to support all pupils, with and without LD, by opting for the best practices during the teaching process. For example, Participant 1 stated: *"I often try to encourage and reward my pupils. Also, if my way*

of teaching does not take into account the special characteristics of the two pupils with LD, then I cause bigger problems to these children"(F1).

The Curriculum

Seventeen GETs stated that the curriculum requirements make studying difficult for pupils with LD, while three stated that they would like to have a second book –less demanding– for each subject, so that pupils with LD could use it. Participant 8 claimed that *"The language subject –as it is formulated– makes understanding almost impossible for Maria"* (F8), while participant 12 stated that: *"I want a second book for each subject, which will be abridged and will include easier content"* (M12).

Family Role

Fifteen (15) GETs stated the family profile is related to the appearance of LD. In detail, three GETs linked the low socio-cultural level of the family with the possible emergence of LD. Participant 20 stated: *"My pupil's family lives in extreme poverty and this fact makes school performance unimaginably difficult"* (F20). Furthermore, GETs emphasized that parents of children with LD do not usually accept this condition, and this may complicate their supportive actions towards these pupils: *"Unfortunately, when parents do not accept the situation, they do not help their child. No matter what we do at school, unfortunately, our efforts are wasted"* (F3). On the contrary, four GETs stated that when parents are aware of the LD issues, their suggestions facilitate and guide the educational practice.

Support practices for pupils with LD
Special Education Services

Eight GETs stated that special education teachers are mainly responsible for supporting pupils with LD: *"I am very lucky because there is a Special Class in my school. I always follow the special education teacher's instructions and I feel confident that Makis is supported in the right way"* (F6).

Educational Practices

GETs referred to a variety of teaching methods that they employ to support pupils with LD. Some referred to (a) collaborative teaching methods (*"Through teamwork, pupils are encouraged to participate, so that they can respond to certain things. They are helped by some pupils who perform better, but without being manipulated by them "*(F16); (b) application of individualized-differentiated instruction (*"While I teach, I give separate activities to my two pupils with LD. It's difficult, of course, but there is no other way"*(F8) and (c) other practices *"I try to use multi-sensory teaching approaches"* (M12).

Nine (9) GETs referred to the teaching material they use to meet their pupils' educational needs. Specifically, they stated that they use texts that are close to the interests of pupils with LD: *"It is very important to use texts that children like."* (F1). They, also, claimed that they search for appropriate material from the internet and use computer software: *"There are programs on computers that help children with LD in spelling and mathematics"* (M4).

In the comments of four (4) GETs, the seat of pupils with LD in the classroom was mentioned. Specifically, three stated that the pupil with LD sits close to the teacher, and one GET stated that the child's seat is close to the one of a good pupil: *"Petros always sits next to*

my desk" (F3). Finally, eight GETs referred to motivation as a way to support their pupils. Participant 4 stated: *"I try to create a good climate regarding psychology in the classroom, reinforcing all efforts, using alternative ways of referring to mistakes and deviant behaviors, assigning exercises as optional, encouraging pupils to try to compete with themselves and not with others"* (M4).

Communication

GETs' communication with pupils with LD

According to the comments of 19 GETs, gaining their pupils' trust is their priority: *"Children must feel comfortable and familiar, they must love you"* (F18). Participant 12 also stated: *"Teachers should offer support with patience, perseverance, understanding and they should gain children's trust. These factors play the most important role"* (M12).

GETs' communication with parents of pupils with LD

All GETs mentioned that they have or attempt to have a good relationship with the parents. In particular, they stated that good communication with pupils' parents is mainly based on parents' trust in teachers: *"I believe that when the children return home from school feeling happy, parents are by our side"* (F5). Twelve (12) GETs reported parents' refusal to admit their child's learning problems as a communication problem. Specifically, they attributed it to parents' emotional condition; to the guilt that they experience, believing they are responsible for their children's LD *("Parents feel guilty about their child's learning difficulties, we understand this, and we support them"* (F15). They also stated that parents may experience the fear of stigma *("They think that we are biased towards their children, that we do not like them, or we face them with prejudice"* (F3).

Regarding the issues that teachers and parents usually discuss, GETS referred to child's school attendance, referral, and diagnosis: *"I work in a village and many parents do not know what to do and which services to turn to regarding their child with LD"* (F20). They also cooperate regarding psychological and counseling support: *"In matters of education and support of my pupil, we follow a common plan with the parents, so as not to confuse the child"* (M4).

GETs' cooperation with the teachers' board

Eight (8) GETs mentioned that they collaborate with the school's teachers' board to exchange information and experiences about the child with LD: *"I am responsible for this class for the first year and I get valuable information from the colleagues who taught my pupils with LD last year"*(F13). On the contrary, six (6) GETs stated that there is no cooperation: *"Cooperation with the teachers' board? It does not exist, and it sounds like a joke"*(F8). Regarding the cooperation with the school principal, all GETs stated that they are satisfied with it.

GETs' cooperation with the educational counsellor

Twelve (12) GETs stated that they cooperate with the educational counsellor for pupils' academic support: *"I ask the counsellor for help and support, as he is specialized in the field in comparison to me"* (F1).Three GETs referred to their cooperation with the counsellor regarding the procedures of referral to the Educational and Counseling Support

Centers, while six GETs reported that the cooperation with the educational counsellor is minimal: *"Assistance from the school counsellor is limited. I called him five times and he came to my class only once for 15 minutes"*(F12).

GETs' cooperation with Educational and Counseling Support Centers

The majority of GETs answered that cooperation with Educational and Counseling Support Centers is limited, while three GETs stated there is no cooperation at all: *"The Educational and Counseling Support Center diagnosed Petros, but whenever I asked for more details and mainly when I asked them to suggest methods of supporting the child, they did not answer"* (F8).

Teacher's Needs

Scientific support

Fifteen (15) GETs referred to the importance of specialized scientific support provided by specialists of education at the school: *"In every school there should be a social worker and a psychologist, for all children, with and without LD"* (F1). They all stated that specialists' assistance is considered as necessary, emphasizing the need for school psychologists: *"My school needs a psychologist to help teachers, children and parents"* (M12).

Limitations of teacher education

All GETs referred to the need for professional training, mainly regarding the recommended educational approaches for pupils with LD. As far as it concerns the degree of satisfaction with the in-service training they had received, nine (9) GETs expressed themselves, stressing that this training mainly focused on theoretical issues of LD and not on practical ones: *"I remember few things from the seminars I attended. Lots of theory and minimal practice. I think I lost my time"* (F1). Three (3) GETs stated that there is an urgent need for teachers training in the LD field:

"The first goal is the education and training of teachers. If this is organized in school settings, colleagues may be able to talk about the specific cases they face in their classrooms and get practical solutions, which they need and do not have. We need something more organized at the undergraduate level in university, as well" (M19)

Means and infrastructure

Eighteen (18) GETs stated that the educational means for the support of pupils with LD is poor and only two reported that they are satisfied with it: *"If the school had educational software for LD, then the results of my work would be much better"* (M12). In addition, four GETs pointed out that although their schools have the infrastructure and facilities, some teachers do not use them: *"A well-equipped laboratory gives you great flexibility and, of course, you need the teacher's knowledge and disposition. You may have a lab, but it is likely that no one will use it "*(F5).

Class size

Twelve (12) GETs referred to the total number of pupils in the class as a factor that affects the effective management of pupils with LD: *"In the 2nd class of the primary school,*

where I teach, I have 20 pupils and three of them face LD. I keep running and still I do not feel confident that I successfully support all children" (F15).

Increase in the Special Classes

The need for the operation of a Special Class in each school was stressed by 16 GETs: *"In my school there are seven pupils with LD and there isn't a Special Class. One must be definitely created "*(F3). In addition, they mentioned that the pupils with very serious LD need a special education teacher in the classroom (co-teaching): *"Because Panagiotis has serious problems, I would like to have a special education teacher in my class"* (F15). Finally, four GETs stated that although there is a Special Class in their school, there are few study hours for pupils with LD: *"My pupil with LD attends the Special Class for only 4 hours a week. Certainly, this is not enough for real help"*(F7).

Curriculum reformation

The role of the curriculum regarding the support of pupils with LD was emphasized by twelve (12) GETs both in terms of the extent and in terms of its content. For example, participant 12 stated: *"The great pressure that I accept to cover the curriculum material makes it difficult for me to help the pupils with LD as much as I would like"* (M12), while participant 5 claimed that *"It is very important to have at least 2 textbooks for each subject so that you can choose according to the level of pupils you have"* (F5).

Personal needs

Nine (9) GETs referred to the external factors that affect their work, namely family obligations: *"I am a single-parent family with three children. When I go to school in the morning, I am already exhausted. I wish the state supported me. It would be good for me, but I could also offer more support to my pupils"* (F11). They also referred to the low salary: *"I offer so much to my job, but the salary I receive is very low. This is unfair"* (F1).

Discussion

According to research findings, GETs are aware of the cognitive characteristics that pupils with LD have, referring to difficulties in reading and understanding a text's context, the production of written speech as well as to difficulties concerning significant spelling mistakes and poor handwriting. Also, some of them stated serious difficulties in math.

Regarding the social and emotional characteristics of pupils with LD, GETs identified a variety of related problems such as feelings of embarrassment and withdrawal, which in combination with low self-esteem may even lead to school refusal and/or aggressiveness. According to Hallahan et al. (2015), pupils with LD may face difficulties in recognizing the extent to which their behaviour may have an impact on their peers due to their social cognition deficiency. This is potentially infused in other skills such as perspective taking and empathy. Thus, it may lead to a vicious circle of obstructing social interaction (Schmidt, Prah & Čagran, 2014).

According to GETs' answers, it can be assumed that they attribute LD appearance to inherent causes as well as to a dysfunctional family environment with serious financial problems. In detail, a very low family income may significantly aggravate the gratification of children's basic needs and be responsible for LD appearance.

GETs believe that even though they tend to be supportive towards all pupils in the general class and particularly take action for pupils with LD, they are confronted with difficulties and/or obstacles that obstruct their efforts. These are commonly attributed to the overloaded curriculum, which may be a stress factor as well, and to the family role. Parents may play a major role, which differentiates from conducive to compounding in terms of the teachers' efforts and the teaching process. In detail, parents' awareness regarding their children's condition may set the stage for fruitful collaboration with the teachers since their role is supportive and concerted actions may arise in classroom settings. On the contrary, when parents are characterized by denial, their actions may interfere in the teaching process in the opposite fashion. This finding highlights the importance of the parents' role as well as the impact they may have on children's academic performance, which is commonly influenced by their affective factors (Phillipson, 2010).

GETs stated that they try to support pupils with LD by employing several educational practices such as individualized-differentiated instruction (Tomlison, 2004; Karantza, 2019), utilizing material that meets those pupils' educational needs and even rearranging pupils' seats. These efforts implicitly indicate GETs' attempts to stimulate pupils' motivation. Their efforts in this direction seem to be of paramount importance, since pupils with LD usually demonstrate lower intrinsic motivation, opt for less challenging academic tasks, and need teachers' support in order to complete those tasks in comparison to pupils without LD (Zisimopoulos & Galanaki, 2009). Taking into consideration that the level of social anxiety that pupils with LD face is higher, while –at the same time– the level of perceived self-efficacy is lower, actions in the direction of increasing their intrinsic motivation and fostering self-confidence may be invaluable regarding their academic performance (Vukman, Lorger & Schmidt, 2018).

Communication seems to be an important element in terms of GETs' efforts to support pupils with LD in the general classroom. To this end, GETs stated that they attempt to construct a non-threatening classroom climate, through which pupils' trust and positive feelings are promoted. Under this rationale, GETs also stated that they aim at communicating with pupils' parents by building a positive relationship, since collaboration with parents is believed to ameliorate interventions in the light of addressing pupils' needs (Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). However, once again, parents' affective factors, such as the fear of social stigma (Veroni, 2019), may obstruct effective communication. GETs shared diverge perceptions regarding their cooperation with the teachers' board, the educational counsellor and the Educational and Counseling Support Centers, authorized for LD diagnosis. Some of them stated that communication with the three aforementioned areas is satisfying and therefore helpful, while others perceived it as problematic with further implications for their classroom work and professional life. Educational counsellors should be actively involved as facilitators regarding teachers' educational planning and teaching practices in the general classroom with special emphasis on pupils with LD. They should support teachers in the direction of tracing these pupils' needs and orchestrating the teaching process with specific recommendations and guidance (Quigney & Studer, 2016). However, the lack of educational counsellor's participation –as it is suggested by the study findings– should be probably highlighted as a deficit of the Greek educational system in the field of LD education.

This deficit is also emphasized through GETs' descriptions of their needs. They underline the need for scientific support and further professional training as well as for other issues related to the educational policy. In detail, GETs seem to believe that the means, infrastructure and the curriculum available compromise their efforts in the direction of supporting pupils with

LD in the general classroom. Simultaneously, they struggle to juggle their personal life in combination with a demanding work, which they, also, consider as low-paid.

Implications in practice

Research findings can offer suggestions for implications in practice in the field of LD education. Thus, a series of recommendations can be offered, which are consistent with other studies regarding the Greek educational system. Initially, GETs should be thoroughly trained in Higher Education Institutions regarding pupils with LD (Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010)) since they seem to be unprepared when they have to teach taking into consideration these pupils' educational needs. This is also the case even when they have attended seminars or workshops in the field during their professional career. Therefore, in-service training programs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020) with emphasis on practical implementation as well as active collaboration with other professionals such as school psychologists or social workers are considered as urgent for GETs (Tsakiridou & Polyzopoulou, 2014), so that they can be aware of the recommended teaching strategies and interventions to facilitate the learning process of pupils with LD and enhance their empowerment. Curriculum and school textbooks should be reformed as well as ICT means (i.e., e-books or educational applications) should be employed in order to scaffold the teaching process and stimulate pupils' interest (Pappas, Papoutsi, & Drigas, 2018). Finally, GETs stated their dissatisfaction regarding their salary and their workload. The financial crisis, which Greece suffered from over the last years, negatively influenced teachers' salary, so policy makers should be aware of the future implications regarding workforce dissatisfaction (Saiti & Papadopoulos, 2015).

Limitations

Although this study has fulfilled its scope, there are some limitations that should be pointed out. Initially, participants' number is restricted, and they come only from a particular area of Greece. More participants can be added in future research covering a wider geographical area. Furthermore, the study follows the qualitative approach, which may exclude definite answers to the research questions, though it offers the opportunity for further and deeper exploration of participants' answers. A quantitative approach may be applied in the future for data enrichment. Finally, pupils with LD and their parents' perceptions can be further explored in future research, so that the findings can be supported through triangulation.

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