

Thinking and acting differently

In the first transnational meeting in Birmingham, during the presentation of the material and throughout our meetings, I was impressed by the different approach towards autism and autistic people.

It felt it was the “right” way to be with autism. It changed the way I understood autism, the way I understood intervention and mostly it changed my expectations of people with autism: not less but different. The approach was very different to the Greek medical model of understanding autism. One thing that we focus on in Greece is on the problems of children and we constantly have the expectation that people with autism do not have the abilities that others have. If you take that perspective- that it is a disorder, then it becomes something that has to be treated. In Greece we do speech language therapy and occupational therapy in order to “fix” autism. Flowing from this, teachers do not then want these children in a mainstream school but in a special school. Teachers think that they need to do extra things, but in reality they have to change their way of thinking.

I felt very excited thinking that autism needn’t be considered a tragedy (as it commonly is perceived in Greece), that the positive approach that was being suggested, could make a lot more of sense in supporting children and their families. Furthermore, the suggested model that focused on taking onboard the perspectives of people with autism, supported by the videos of people with autism talking about their school experiences, made me feel very eager to participate in the project, and thinking of ways to use the valuable information we were receiving to contribute to change in our country. It was very tangible material already developed and ready to share. One of the video clips that made a real impression on me was Dean Beadle’s (a young autistic man) video clip speaking about his experiences. Dean was very positive in the clip. Sharing his positive experiences and the strengths of who Dean is was very powerful. When I saw the video I was working in schools but I had not used the materials. I knew pupils’ needs and that the teachers sometimes viewed these pupils as enemies. Teachers needed to be informed about how children with autism feel and I realized that the most powerful way of doing this was through the videos.

I showed the video clips to the teachers and they were surprised that Dean has autism. In my broader work with teachers at schools, I tried to share the values that shook me that day in the beginning of the project: respecting the child, respecting autism, listening to the child's opinion, understanding and interpreting children's behaviours in order to find solutions to difficulties in the classroom.

We analysed behaviours, we tried interventions and we found solutions to problems, making teachers feel confident in supporting children with autism and children in classes less stressed and happier. In many cases the teachers' response was so amazing and strong that it felt like we were making big changes. I also use this changed perspective in my private practice with children and their families: being positive, offering solutions that are respectful towards the child.

Elena Gioroukou: Trainer, Greece