

THE PAMMAKARISTOS CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION

1953 - 2006

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Short History

The Foundation, a private organization, is supervised and funded by the Hellenic Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. It was established by the *Pammakaristos* Monastery in 1953, initially to the aid of children in the earthquake-stricken Ionian Islands and subsequently Volos and Santorini. In the course of these 53 years, the Foundation has also had to deal with other groups of children in need of immediate help. In summary, its activities can be divided in four periods:

1st Period 1953-1957

The Foundation began as a support organization in the August of 1953 after destructive earthquakes in the Ionian Islands. The community of nuns in the monastery of *Pammakaristos* looked after more than 50 children, the families of whom had been left homeless and looking for shelter in other regions of the country. Leading the creation of the Foundation were Reverend Chalavazis and Marina A. Koumantou. Thanks to their efforts in securing vital relief funds from humanitarian organizations and individuals abroad, the temporary summer camp facilities transformed into a secure and homely environment.

In 1954, an elementary school was added. By the end of the 50s, the Foundation had welcomed more children from the earthquake-stricken regions of Volos and Santorini.

2nd Period 1958-1980

Shortly before the end of the 50s, thousands of Greek immigrants from the ex-Soviet Union were forced to leave their homes and return to Greece, causing serious social stir. Having lived many years under poor conditions, they returned to a second exile. With limited means at its disposal, the State organizes welcome-centers in Lavrio, the village of Vigla near Arta, and other regions, where the refugees had to live within a very difficult environment.

The World Church Council addresses the Foundation, which has already become known for its contribution, in order to protect juveniles and offer them an opportunity to adapt to the new conditions of stay. The Foundation took action, but the children are so many that the housing needs to be extended. Foreign charity funds respond and the Swedish organization "Radda Barnen" will finance the operational expenses of the Foundation for the next 15 years.

The social understanding of the time demanded that each gender is separately educated. Being host to girls only, the Foundation moves to the creation of a secondary Housekeeping school, parallel to the elementary school, filling the gap that existed in the country as to the vocational training of elementary school graduates

who had trouble following the standard high school training. The program was considered innovative and later on the Ministry of Education showed interest in its structuring and operation in order to regulate the field of secondary vocational training education.

The many and varied issues facing the returning immigrant families both in social and economic terms complicate even further the educational and psychological problems of their children. Evidently, specialist treatment of these problems from experts in the social and human sciences was needed. Setting off with one social worker, the Foundation's staff grows to include psychologists, child psychiatrists, physiotherapists, and music therapists. In parallel, intense efforts are made to achieve State recognition and to place the Foundation under the administration of the disabled at the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Furthermore, under special agreement, IKA -the main social insurance body of Greece- approves the funding of food supplies for children whose parents are registered with it and are in need of protection and education.

3rd Period 1981-1992

In response to the educational and social problems facing the children, the public elementary school of general education is converted to a special school. The Housekeeping school (household studies) is closed. In its place, vocational workshops are created, for which responsible is the Ministry of Social Welfare. For the most part of the 3rd decade its history, the Foundation engages in the planning and implementation of European programs, which provide opportunities to educate and specialize staff members even further and to design special education programs employing new methodologies. Through this specialization, the Foundation gains respect and is valued by the Greek State and society in general. The result is a massive inflow of applications for children with severe difficulties and in particular communication problems.

4th Period 1993-Today

The Foundation has created the preconditions for a new opening toward all children suffering serious developmental problems and their families. The Foundation has a new focus and philosophy. All children have the right to a decent living, which is possible through special training beyond academic knowledge and into fields such as self-help, social skills. Supported is provided through special therapeutic interventions such as music therapy, speech therapy, psychological backing for children and their families, drama therapy and physical exercise.

In association with the department of social welfare of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Foundation is formalized as a private, non-profit organization with clear goals and directions. This in turn enables the foundation to accept public funding.

At the beginning of the new century, the *Pammakaristos* Children's Foundation is a mature welfare and educational agency of national and international stature. Its expertise in the domains of autism and mental disability make it the only major educational institution for serious developmental problems in Greece. The Foundation looks after 220 children and young people. Its activities consist of:

- Two classes of nursery school, which support a mix of children with communication difficulties in various degrees, including 10 children with issues so severe that they are not even accepted in special nurseries.
- Two public special schools (one primary, one secondary). The largest of their kind in the country, they host 6-25 year old students, offering scientific support, food and transportation.
- Boarding school (60 beds) for children from all over Greece.
- Specialized vocational training centre for young people (15-30 years) with mental disabilities.
- Medical-educational team consisting of a child psychiatrist, psychologists, speech therapists, social workers and a team of experts applying treatment through physical training and creative activities.

Special Education

Until the end of the 80s, special schools in the country accepted students with either perception defects or learning difficulties or a less than normal IQ. Children with mental disabilities and other developmental or complex disorders had no access to education and would most often follow some public or private program of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare.

The need to engage the educational needs of children that the Foundation was hosting, gave the initial push for redirecting to the sector of special education from 1980 onwards. Initially and until 1987, the student population of our educational units showed learning difficulties that were convoluted with the complex social problems the children and their families were facing.

On an exploratory basis, a first serious attempt was made to integrate 6 children with serious disorders in 1987. All children showed complex learning difficulties in communication and language. The workgroup was headed by an instructor and a speech therapist of the Foundation. The program focused on the development of self-help and basic (literacy, numeracy etc.) skills.

After two years of hard work the Foundation decided through its scientific committee that it was able to accept more children, given that this short experience had already proven that all children can be educated if offered the appropriate program.

This program also became the reason for a closer cooperation between the educators of the Ministry of Health and the scientific personnel of the Foundation. The result was the creation of a workgroup that not only supported this effort, but further added the maximum in a culture change regarding the education of children with developmental disorders in *Pammakaristos* and countrywide. More specifically, the Foundation:

- Translated and adapted into the Greek language, special educational programs (Derbyshire Language Scheme, Let's Play Language etc.) as well as evaluation tools.
- Realized a special education program for the creation of a new unit for educating students with serious developmental disorders over 14 years old when traditionally special education would end. This unit was later integrated into secondary education with law 2000 for special education.
- Applied innovative educational methods with the use of alternative communication. It is worth mentioning that in the frame of these efforts, the Foundation took over the legal representation of the method for alternative supportive communication MAKATON in Greece. MAKATON has been used in this population of children with remarkable success in over 40 countries around the world. The organization responsible, MAKATON HELLAS, aims to

propagate the program through countrywide seminars, as well as the commissioning of educational materials.

- Processed and designed an educational program well before the Education Foundation developed its analytical program for special education.
- Realized an educational trip to Great Britain, giving 10 educators the opportunity to study the educational program as implemented in five special schools.
- In cooperation with the Ombudsperson for Special Education, realized four events for the educators of the periphery of east Attica on issues of evaluation and teaching, transferring its knowledge and experience.
- Conducted and implemented research on the improvement of communication and language skills of children with developmental needs by using alternative communication, which was presented at the International Conference on Autism in Glasgow in 2000.

The initiative of *Pammakaristos* to integrate children with serious disorders was warmly received by the Ministry of Health. Until 1992, the model of *Pammakaristos* was recognized countrywide and already many special schools have the ability to cover educationally children with special needs.

Participation in European Programs

Since 1980, the Foundation has tried to make use of the opportunities given by European programs, always aiming to develop and improve its services in welfare and special education. From 1982 until today, it has implemented over 80 such programs.

In 1999, when programs for special education were announced, the recognition of our expertise in diagnosing and treating serious developmental disorders was confirmed with the assignment of:

- One European Program (EPEAEK-I) for the creation of structures of pre-vocational training and workshops on autonomous living (1999).
- Two European Programs (EPEAEK-II) for the specialization and further education of over 2000 educators and administrators of special education countrywide in disorders of the autistic range and mental disabilities.
- Three European Programs (Health-Welfare) for employees in the broader welfare sector in topics relating to:
 - The training of administrators as tutors of autonomous living and semiautonomous living for people with mental disabilities-autism.
 - The promotion of functional skills in various age groups of those served by social welfare -tackling of developmental disorders etc.

Educational Philosophy

The main issues concerning the team of educators of the public school and the special scientists of the Foundation from the very beginning related to the type of education and the way of educating as well.

In reality, the education of children with developmental disorders is the basic reference for the intervention. Here education means treatment, which in turn means that the basic aim is the prevention of future behavioral problems, which may lead to asylum situations.

What exactly should this education entail? What topics should be included? With which adjustments could the analytical program of general education be used? With which means and in what ways would this teaching be realized? These were some of the initial questions facing our team.

From the beginning it was clear that contrary to general education, where the program is set according to the abilities and needs of the normal student, in special education and specifically the field of developmental disorder, any reference to the average student would be at least ineffective for the design and implementation of any teaching program. Like all other children, those with developmental disorders are different with each other in terms of abilities, interests, character and needs. Also, the type and seriousness of the disability as well as the number of disabilities, which a child may be potentially facing, are factors of multidimensionality, which eliminate reference to a typical student.

Regardless of these differences, these students have one thing in common: Their disability affects the process of learning. It is therefore important for the design of the educational program to take into account the special characteristics of specific disorders.

The impact of mental disabilities on the process of learning is entirely different to that of autism or other learning difficulties, both in terms of the way in which the students learn, as well as the way they are treated by the teachers. And while the student with mental disabilities faces complex perceptual barriers that when overcome almost full knowledge is possible, children with autism, who fail to understand meanings, need strict teaching structures in order to acquire parallel categories of knowledge.

The analytical program of general education that was used in special education did not serve the needs of students and further annulled the efforts of educators who used it, as they recognized that knowledge limitations blocked the inflow of theoretical information. Students with mental retardation have special difficulty in the auditory processing of data.

Coming to contact with practices in other countries and especially in Great Britain was great help in shaping a systematic approach. This systematic approach focused on solving three topics of educational practice:

- The basic educational targets
- The teaching itself
- The evaluation of the progress of students

For the basic educational targets, the team created a tool of initial evaluation in all areas of development based on the stages of normal development, in order to determine the abilities and inabilities of each child. In the initial stages the evaluation was conducted with the assistance of special scientists. Later on, however, the educators acquired the know-how and experience and today they conduct the evaluation independently.

Program Content

Based on the initial evaluation, we then faced the issue of formalizing the content of the program, which was set out on the following principles:

- _ First of all it was important to ensure that all the kids would have the opportunity to develop basic skills like attention, concentration, mimics, comprehension and use of language. The teaching is based on these skills and these skills are important for the future learning of the child.
- _ Based on normal development it was decided to include elements of play in the teaching, given that play is the natural way of discovering and processing the environment through which knowledge comes. Children with developmental disorders lack in this respect and those with more serious disorders should be taught how to play in a very systematic way.
- _ According to the principle of equal opportunities, the program content would have to include at least on a basic level topics from the program of general education (language, mathematics, gymnastics, music etc.).
- _ The most important idea to reflect the educational philosophy of the cross-disciplinary team of the Foundation was choosing to educate children in the skills that concerned self-help and autonomous living. In this respect, the program includes lessons that span from using the toilet for students with serious and complex disorders, to cooking for students with higher abilities.

The formalized program was balanced on the following three axes:

- _ The cognitive
- _ The social
- _ The creative

Taking advantage of every social event (feast, scheduled visit, activities regarding health and the environment that are organized on an annual basis), the aim is for students to gain experiences and to practical and functional knowledge, which will serve their everyday reality, as well as offer them the opportunity to control as much as possible expressing their preferences and emotions, their wants and choices.

The day-to-day educational program is divided in three zones:

- _ 1st zone, 9.00-10.30: Cultivation of language and basic pre-mathematical and mathematical sense as well as socialization. Activities in this zone are: Conversing with the team (attendance check, calendar, weather, how was yesterday, what about today, personal hygiene and food programs).
- _ 2nd zone, 10.00-12.00: Exercising technical skills and understanding of the physical world. This zone includes activities such as exercising gentle movement, handicrafts, observing and processing the physical environment (we and the world).
- _ 3rd zone, 12.00-13.00: Dedicated exclusively to having a meal, which is fundamental in the educational process. It includes activities such as preparing each child from a hygienic point of view, setting the table, choosing and serving the meal, cleaning the space and washing food vessels.

Educational Methodology

Understanding the nature of the disorder and its influence on learning is a basic requirement for our educational approach. Mental disabilities, autism, or other developmental disorders require different training methods. The latest educational approaches have been followed. These view the student as an active participant in well structured, distinct activities that help the child function more effectively in his or her everyday life. Without excluding individualized teaching, mainly in terms of skill development, team work has been considered central, given that learning is a social activity. Because of the integral part of vocal communication as a vehicle for the transfer of knowledge, it has been judged necessary to employ alternative and supportive communication channels. Educators have been trained in the Language Program MAKATON and the Foundation is its official representative in Greece. The part reflecting educational philosophy is concerned with the way of teaching and shaping the teaching environment.

Based on research data relating to the details and cognitive deficiencies of students with mental retardation, efforts were made to adjust class sizes. Common lavatories for smaller children have been withdrawn. Each class has a fully equipped toilette for training in basic hygienic skills. The classroom seemed more like a microcosm. We created corners for training in certain skills (play-corner, crafts-corner, basins, food lockers etc.).

The educational approach follows the model of normal development. In effect, students experience everyday social situations in which they are asked to participate actively through well structured and distinct activities. With the excuse of a calendar event or situation (e.g. olive picking, Christmas) the teacher plans the educational unit and specific activities in all educational subjects. For instance, having observed grape-gathering and wine-pressing, the students are given the opportunity to be involved in the subject, buying grapes, eating grapes, making grape candy, painting grapes, watching the grapes grow and transform into wine or raisin, conversing about grape-gathering customs in various parts of the country. All these activities help students, depending on their cognitive level, to sense the world that surrounds them, observe, study, and make use of it to serve their needs.

With support from European Programs upon the specialization of educators (See above), the Foundation has the ability to publish and distribute through the internet five educational guides detailing our educational methodology on:

- 1) Communication and language
- 2) Mathematics
- 3) Pre-vocational and vocational skills
- 4) Electronic computers
- 5) Psychokinetics

The role of the family

Let it be noted that in the first two years that the school piloted the acceptance of students with serious disorders, efforts were made to engage parents in the educational work. Each parent was invited to participate in the classroom every 15 days, to exchange of views/ideas/perspectives and to support the continuation of the program at home. Unfortunately, the program was discontinued mainly for administrative reasons. However, the experience gained proved that the only way to tackle children's special needs is through the active participation of parents and especially through relations of trust and respect between educators and parents. The following thoughts reflect our position regarding the participation of parents in the educational work.

Undoubtedly, the role of the parents is central in the education of children with developmental disorders. But how are they involved in it? First of all, the ultimate goal of special education is the generalization and transfer of skill and abilities acquired at school to the home. This requires as a fundamental prerequisite the direct communication between educator and family. Second, the educator, mainly in the early stages, has to collect information about the needs, customs, wants, interests and other individual characteristics of the student. Naturally, the most reliable source of information is the family. It is subsequently clear that without cooperation between family and school any educational intervention would be rendered ineffective. But what would be the most appropriate model for such a partnership? Most certainly, the parents have the highest interest in the education of their children but the responsibility of teaching belongs to the educator who will have to lead the initiative in such a partnership.

In this form of cooperation, the educator assumes the role of the coordinator planning, organizing, and implementing the training program. The parents, particularly those of children with severe difficulties, assume the role of the co-educators. The bulk part of the educational content is sustained at home (i.e. the processes of self-help, language development etc.). The role of the co-educator is not always liked or accepted by parents. Many parents cannot or do not want to respond to that role and sometimes the educator may feel inhibited to intervene, because some parents deny cooperation. Many times also, this role even for the most cooperative of parents is hard and even though they do teach a lot to their children, they lack the necessary know-how and educational methods to face up to the difficulties of their children. As a result the teacher has to support and train the parents, in order to use the special techniques, as well as an organized and systematic methodology.

Basically, the educational program for students with mental disabilities is designed and evaluated at school by the educator and is implemented by the parents at home with guidance from the educator. In this way we ensure the harmonization of educational goals and homogeneity in the educational approach. Given the necessity of cooperation the next step for the educator is to find ways for this cooperation to function best.

Cooperation with a family (individual)

Cooperation with many families simultaneously (group)

These two types of cooperation are not mutually exclusive. Depending on the situation, the most appropriate type is used. In both cases, what is needed is good programming, so that no time is lost and the functions of home and school are not interrupted.

In the case of individual cooperation, in order for the educator to come to know the family and the way the student functions within it, repeated meetings and home visits may be needed. In both cases, time is essential. Planning properly for a meeting in which the maximum amount of information is conveyed can reduce the number of meetings to the essential minimum. The visits of parents at school are very important because they are given the opportunity to observe their children in a different environment and to learn from the techniques the educators use and apply them at home. Home visits cannot be planned during school hours and are therefore provided on a voluntary basis.

Group meetings have many forms. The educator may often invite all the parents of a class of children or arrange fixed meetings within the school year for parents to be informed about the general educational program. The educator may also organize meetings for the training of parents on a specific topic for parents of children from different classes and ages. These meetings are very valuable for parents who understand they are not the only to face difficulties. Very often these teams can be transformed into self-help teams that may very well support parents in need. Opportunities for team gatherings of parents with educators also assist the development of good relations between school and family, which leads to the minimization of feelings of mistrust and doubt between the two parts. The disadvantage of these meetings comes from the fact that they are organized after school hours, that is during the educators' own free time.

The cooperation is not exhausted within the strict confines relating to specific children. The whole school is a community, which must be seen in its entirety in order to function best. In this community, the students, their families and educators have equal input. Parent associations on their own can help this community only so much. An association of both parents and educators would ensure that their common purpose of addressing the needs of the children through the appropriate education is appropriately met.