



## Participatory Systematic Empirical Observation and Special Education Training To Students With Autism

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### ABSTRACT

This paper study is to explore possible benefits of participatory systematic empirical observation for the teacher who designs, implements teaching interventions to students with autism. The research is based on empirical studies that have been applied in the last 20 years in the University and on the literature review. The methodology describes the data from recordings with certain protocols applied in special education and training with the pedagogical tool which summarized in the acronym (TISDIPs-SET) Targeted Individually Structured and Differentiated teaching Integration Programs of Special Education and Training. The results highlight the advantages and disadvantages of participatory systematic empirical observation in autism research. Finally, it is proposed that there is a need for further study of linguistic interventions.

**Keywords:** *Participatory Systematic Empirical Observation, Special Education, Training, Autism, TISDIPs-SET.*

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper describes an ongoing experiment to develop participatory systematic empirical observation and special education training (SET) to students with autism [1]. The impasses of the technocratic approach to teaching, education in general and educational research raise a number of issues for the quality of the special educational services provided. The field of special education has the interest of several teachers [2] at all levels of formal and informal and lifelong education. Teaching follows prescribed steps, aims mainly at achieving predetermined results that have massor application, often away from the real special educational needs (SEN) of students and promotes knowledge management mechanistically with the support of Information Communication and Technologies. The current needs in schools conduct the teachers to play a dual role that is observed of this teacher and this researcher act in the classroom [3]. Similarly, the legitimized, conventional educational research focuses exclusively on the validity and reliability, objectivity and generality of its conclusions. Thus, often, the knowledge produced does not include the tensions and conflicts which teachers faced when they support students with disabilities at school every day; they investigate, meditate and judge. Educational action research as a concept and as a practice is an alternative perspective and challenge in the field of teaching and evolves through the direct involvement and active participation of people with autism and the others around them [4]. The principles and philosophy of integration interventions in the classroom presupposes a drastic reform of all educational and social institutions, aiming at the better-quality provision [5] of educational services to students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/Ds) in all forms of social life [6]. So, the research project [7] "Cygnnet Mentoring Project", under the leadership and coordination of a research team at University of London studied for two years the effectiveness of guidance interventions in adults with autism, its design, improving the well-being of adults by diagnosis such as Asperger's syndrome or high functional autism. The findings, from the data of the National Audit Office, underscored the inadequacy of effective services for adults with autism, showing that only 12% had full employment and 70% had additional mental health problems. They also showed that most students with autism stated that they preferred individual SET sessions with a mentor, which offer limited, targeted support through well-informed [8]. These new concepts have given rise to intense concern expressed with reservations by several teachers who are concerned about the results and quality of the education provided in terms of academic and social meaning.

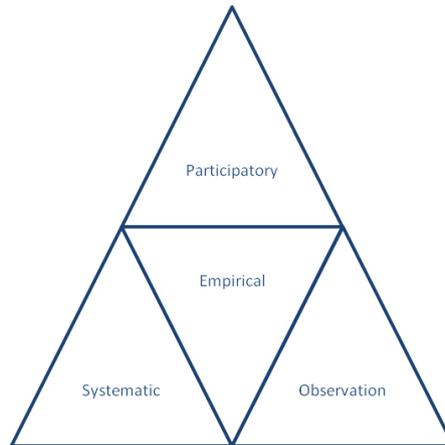
The need for evaluation in pupils and students with autism, supported by teaching interventions in special education and training (SET), has become as imperative as ever before. In the Greek literature [9], in the textbooks of research methodology [10] they include mainly researches in general in education, in the social sciences, the science of anthropology and less in SET. As Avramidis and Kalyva mention in their book "Methods of research in special education", in recent years there have been great changes in many educational systems, including the Greek one as a result of what it is called internationally [11] in the literature "integration" of people with autism. Thus, interdisciplinary

research [12] changes the way it is conducted by integrating links between scientific fields, beyond geographical boundaries, and between scientists and wider social groups of stakeholders. Changing the approach [13] to scientific research requires adaptations to institutional support structures as well as specific programs [14] in order to address the new challenges in teaching interventions in people with autism [15]. Specific events of participatory research [16] include, the collaboration [17] with the students themselves, the engagement with the community through social media and the consultation with people with autism and relevant community organizations [18] such as the scientific network on autism active in special education and disability issues [19].

The necessity for participatory research [20] also arose from the integration of the educational community for students with autism, people with disabilities on the teaching - research subject, the methodology and the way it is applied. In addition, another important element in the necessity of participative work concerns learning accessibility, so that in order to make school and academic integration accessible to all, with an emphasis on those who are underrepresented in the research such as those who do not speak with autism or those with emotional difficulties and problems of delinquent behaviour who go through domestic violence abusively and present general and specific learning difficulties. Given that special education has been influenced by both positivism and interpretive constructionism and critical theory, participatory systematic and empirical observations attempted. Observations are routed into the classroom in the presence of the student and their narratives are recorded as they evolve in the teaching interactions and may refer to spontaneous narrations regarding the individual history, the family history for the school, and academic history. The purpose of this study is to explore possible benefits of participatory systematic empirical observation (PSEO) for the teacher who designs, implements teaching interventions interacting with students with autism. Specific objectives refer to the possibility of involving people with autism in teaching plans [1] as well as the formulation of realistic teaching priorities [2] following systematic empirical observation.

In the expediency of the study [21], the observer supporter of the person with autism is clearly differentiated from the role of the passing viewer and this was stated by the participatory observation [22] where the observed individuals know that the observer is present in order to gather information about their behaviour. He had the opportunity to experience the same experiences as the pupils/students who study process and preceded the construction of the differentiated plan of teaching interventions [23], because he had gained access to behaviours [24] concerning the individual method of study and manifested openly. He also had the ability to record and understand the codes of communication that develop between people with autism [25] and the interacting relationships of groups and to experience unique experiences.

The Clarification of terms focus in the Participatory systematic empirical observation and action research. The principle of PSEO is the recognition and elimination of the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant. The scale of participation of people with autism includes different types of their participation ranging from the lack of information, when it is carried out afterwards without prior consultation from the beginning, and is done by the established educational power of "special" scientists until role-sharing, planning and decision-making. The PSEO is defined by teachers - researchers who eliminate the traditional power imbalance by adopting participatory practices because it is important to participate in understanding the peculiarities of autism and is based on research action. The term research-action refers to a form of investigation carried out by the educational researchers themselves on their practice, in order to understand certain issues of particularities of pupils / students and to develop actions and solutions. More specifically, the educational research action suggests a process that under certain conditions can bring about significant changes in the quality of integrational teaching interventions in (SET) for people with autism. Through the Community contribution, the PSEO can (a) improve the quality of teaching methods and place interventions in a real context, thus facilitating the translation of results into practice. Moreover, the PSEO (b) ensures that research-action produces relative and significant benefits for individuals with autism and (c) enhances "participation, cooperation and trust between educators-researchers and people with autism and their allies.



**Figure1:** Map of [PSEO]: Participatory Systematic Empirical Observation

However, in addition to the benefits, there is some evidence to suggest that participatory research is not yet the rule, but rather the exception. At present, it is believed that much research into special education and more on autism does not involve any community involvement or only symbolic participation of the community of people with autism. The British report "A Future Made Together" clarified that opinions on the prevalence of PSEO were mixed. The tendencies of some educational researchers who saw themselves as committed to the community of people with autism prevailed, less their participation and effectiveness than teaching interventions. In cases where the participatory approach does not remain symbolic and there is community involvement with autism, teachers-researchers apply it in order to "describe the context of intervention" and respond to the requirements of funding, or of the ethics committee, and the opportunity for a real result through teaching is lost. Thus, these symbolic approaches lead to practices of non-participation in teaching interactions without yielding any substantial results for the integration of autism in the community undermine the relationship between people with autism and the teachers who support them.

The observations of special educational needs SENs and teaching interventions take mind with the way in which special educational needs are understood through PSEO. Also, highlights various questions of methodology and incorporates quantitative and qualitative methods as well as views of various research examples in the descriptions of these records. Donna M Mertens on the SEN cites two typical theoretical examples of thought in the interventions including views from the perspectives of minorities as it happens with people and disabilities. The basic ideals in successive steps guide the teacher-researcher in the process of PSEO and cause further reflection on the content of interventions in people with autism. Based on the positive model of thought for SET, the medical, experimental, semi-experimental, comparative and quantitative model are used in interventions through teaching. Also, based on the constructive interpretive research model for the SET, the concepts of naturalistic and qualitative model are used in the methodology of systematic empirical observation of the SEN.



**Figure2:** The methodology of Special Education and Training (SET) and Autism in the University.

The methodology of systematic empirical observation is meaningful according to critical theory and the liberating tendency in order to reduce the constraints posed by deficit. The participatory theory and leads to interventions that differentiate and transform teaching practice. Also, the observation methodology of the SEN is meaningful according to

the ontological or epistemological view and knowledge derived from the participatory research with hetero-observations and self-observations. Thus a deontological methodological question arises as to the understanding of the particularities of students with autism and the nature of reality when it comes to functional interventions in the individual method of study, in people with disorders of the autistic spectrum and specific learning difficulties; Moreover, according to the epistemological view, the special educational needs for autism are reflected in the descriptive or observation where the teacher-researcher of action reflects on the nature of knowledge and the relationship between what he knows about the autism. The action research includes how to identify the data by PSEO and the formulation of realistic objectives and the design of teaching interventions. Finally, the observation methodology of the SENs is meaningful by understanding the individual peculiarities of the person with autism and his pathology [26]. This refers to the way in which the educational researcher will implement the PSEO in order to lead to the desired knowledge and to it shall support the individual method of study through appropriately adapted and individualized teaching interventions.

The observations, therefore, refer to a series of events in the surrounding area of people with autism, where the individual sessions- interventions of SET take place and interactive behaviour. Thus, observations are defined as naturalistic when they occur in normal classes or as laboratory observations when they occur in places where integration classes operate or in places where individual SET sessions take place. Each of these forms of observations of people with special educational needs derived from the living disability of autism has a counterpart to what we are discussing as a moral dimension and occurs in the teaching interventions of "the circle of friends" [27] with the support of people with autism with their peers in the school or university. So, the observation is defined as the ability of educational researchers to collect information through the senses such as sight, hearing and smell by knowing the limitations that refer to the fact that they can only record behaviours and not belief trends. Characteristic elements that can be recorded through participatory observation are how the particular person with autism acts in a certain space and time, after being observed interactive in courses, in events and actions through specific procedures at school or university [28].

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present research is empirical and bibliographic and is recommended by data -recordings obtained through participatory systematic empirical observation (PSEO) with certain protocols applied to special education and specifically the pedagogical tool (TISDIPs-SET). This is defined by the acronym TISDIPs-SET and includes individual tools that serve the [Targeted by Individually Structured and Differentiated Didactic Integration Programs of Special Education Training]. In this tool, systematic empirical observation is the first and basic part of the teaching interventions in order for the teacher-researcher to formulate realistic and individualized teaching objectives. Observations are initiated in the classroom in the presence of the student and the interacting narratives are recorded as hetero-observations and auto-observations [29] regarding what is spontaneously declared and correlated with the individual history, the family history, the school/academical history of the person with autism.

The bibliographic mapping of TISDIPs-SET in 2017, derives from the study of issues in the field of SET, in the decades 1970-2015 that have been published in research monographs, funded researches and articles. Many researchers talk about new developments and views in special education, and this seems to have been helped by the publication of the Warnock Report by the Department of Education of England. This is the text of the multidisciplinary committee with a view to studying the issues of special education and proposing measures to improve it further. This committee, after ten years of study in 1978, submitted its report to the Ministry of Education and was included in a volume entitled "Special Needs". The content of the Warnock Report influenced the policy of governments and led to significant changes in the educational systems of most countries of the planet, including our country, which only in 2020 with the law 2817 included people who "have autism and other development disorders" in the regulatory texts of education.

Moreover, according to the literature review, TISDIPs-SET has an educational orientation, without ignoring other theoretical impressions from the clinical or medical or medico-biological or psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic way of thinking that contribute to the education of people with autism. Besides, it is no coincidence, that Itard, Seguin, Montessori were doctors. According to the educational model, the first phase of TISDIPs-SET does not examine the symptoms, causes and factors that cause autism. On the contrary, it utilizes the teaching interactions and narratives in order to understand the individual carrier of autism and to jointly design teaching intervention programs, which facilitate the person with autism in his everyday life without causing him additional difficulties. The PSEO, in special education is recognized on the basis of the psycho-pedagogical characteristics of teaching. However, many factors can complicate efforts to adopt collaborative research practices, with the TISDIPs-SET tool, and one of these reasons is that the scientific research infrastructure does not favour participatory work in many ways. Another reason why researchers may not adopt a participatory approach is due to challenges with objectivity and methodology [10]. Some researchers have expressed concern that objectivity may be dealing with people with autism [9]. However, others refer to "serious prejudices" when teaching interventions are carried out without the influence of the school and academical community. Some other researchers report that teachers may disagree with what people with autism say but are afraid to ask them to change it because they themselves think this is not easy to implement [4]. In addition, research suggests that teachers may not

participate in participatory observational practices because they believe that effective participatory research requires them to have strong relationships with the community, and forging these relationships takes time [12]. However, the investment of this time is extremely valuable because it can cultivate a strong connection or interpersonal relationship with people for whom their participation in teaching has never been a given and so important because autism is a lifelong disability. Thus, the PSEO included in the first phase of TISDIPs-SET [14] can improve the relationship and trust between the teachers who care for people with autism and the school and academical community and the wider autism community and therefore includes a strategy, in itself, to improve the relationships. Therefore, the educators, the special teachers are called to adopt the participatory approach to teaching, which aims to create constructive alliances, thus improving the effectiveness of interventions in the individual method of study and their collaborations with the community.

In contrast to these psycho-pedagogical considerations for the methodology of the PSEO of teaching interventions in people with autism according to TISDIPs-SET, there are the innovations and important discoveries of the natural sciences with the positivism to dominate the field of educational research for the teaching. Besides, positivism as an external realistic ontology refers to the world guided by natural laws and scientists are called to take this into account when attempting systematic empirical observations so as to aim at the final analysis by predicting and controlling natural phenomenon but also by formulating generalizations that apply to each spatiotemporal context such as the weekly timetable of a school or university.

The psycho-pedagogical considerations for the methodology of PSEO of teaching interventions in people with autism according to TISDIPs-SET come from the areas of psychology and contribute to the types of qualitative research. According to this, the basic hypotheses of translational constructionism discuss that knowledge is socially constructed by people who are actively involved in the research process and that the educational researchers involved in it are invited to try to understand the complex world through the perspective of the participating people with autism. According to the interpretative constructive model adopted in the PSEO, TISDIPs-SET underlines that research is a product of values and belief principles of teacher researchers and therefore cannot exist independently of them. For this reason, the individual objectives include the possibility of involving pupils and students with autism in curricular interventions [1] by formulating realistic teaching priorities [2] following systematic empirical observation. Thus, the words, beliefs of action research educators in vitally enter into the research process and many pedagogical interpretations and therefore many conclusions can be drawn. In this way, truth is determined through the interpretative constructive associative ontology, which is included in the present methodology, given that observation is a useful research method for the teaching priorities and can be used as an accompanying complement to other educational methods such as interviews and questions.

## **RESEARCH RESTRICTIONS**

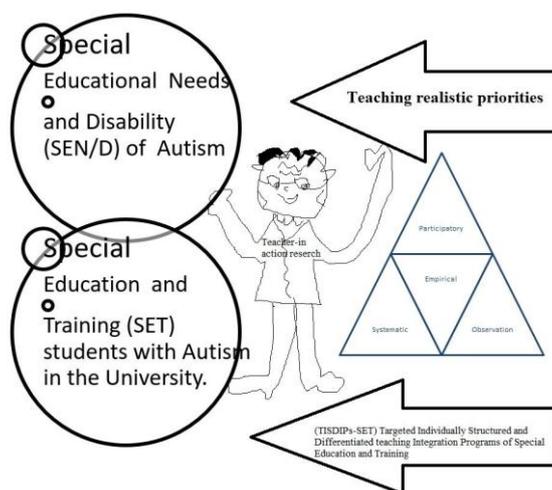
The PSEO becomes necessary to understand the content of the behaviour of the person with a diagnosis of autism with heteronormativity for academic performance in courses and behavioural problems when supported by special educators. However, the research limitations in the present work stem from the fact that PSEO and teaching interventions in people with autism have no funding in academic settings and therefore participatory teaching styles of teaching work are excluded. Moreover, participatory approaches are not encouraged, for career development, in the current university structure, because more experienced academics do not support participative work. Therefore, systemic change is needed to ensure that participatory practices in teaching interventions in people with autism are taken into account in current research frameworks. Another limitation according to subjective epistemology is the acquisition of knowledge and the interpretive dialectical methodology resulting from the fact that teachers can draw certain conclusions about a behaviour when observing it but cannot be sure of the correctness of these conclusions.

## **RESULTS**

The participatory observation records the essential data between the time of occurrence and the describing of a behaviour that may not have been mentioned in the opinion. The observations are immediate and can be obtained with certain special education protocols such as the one described in the first phase of TISDIPs-SET.

The first research issue seems to be answered with some positive reasons because a few pupils/students with autism are given the opportunity to participate in the plans of teaching interventions [1]. This is attributed to the educational character of the methodology and to the individual constructions of reality according to the perceptions of each participant in the research-action and the dialectical character of different perceptions and it is partially achieved in terms of data collected through qualitative methodologies observations on the SENs of students. These, in most cases, do not reflect the best, most complete and functional descriptions of the social world regarding what happens in the lives of people with autism. This results from the more than twenty years of experience at the Agronomy University of Athens, applying PSEO to the understanding of the content of the particularities of the students, at a time when the knowledge about autism was limited on the system of beliefs and perceptions and adopt vague scientific positions in their teaching

work. Moreover, this is reinforced by the position of critical theory by the positivists and refers to the lack of validity of participatory systematic empirical observation regarding the research of action on minorities. Although post-modern, educational researchers identify themselves by sharing often, the same ontological and epistemological assumptions as performers and differ from the latter in the objectives of their observations. Thus, educational researchers who share the views of the critical view of action research, argue that the PSEO may have changed the rules of the game at school or at the University and in the classroom but do not change the nature of the game because it reflects personal ideologies and values. Especially when educational researchers do not aim at a simple description of social skills and the social world in school and the classroom, but aim at change, through the empowerment of those involved in systematic empirical observation. Part of this empowerment is also described as a way for the minorities, such as people with autism, in order to enable the participants to understand and criticize accessibility living conditions and to choose the appropriate action to improve their lives. In the results of this investigation, it was carried out on the basis of the data of the recordings of the individual sessions of the SET and is characterized by an external realistic positioning. In Universities as the schools, SET is defined as an internal idealistic ontology, but always in the light of a subjective reactionary and ideologically charged epistemological position. In order to achieve this objective of involving people with autism and therefore of social change in the classroom system, traditionally dialectical participatory teaching methods have been used, integrating into qualitative research models that place particular emphasis on the combination of different methods of data collection. In order to ensure that the most comprehensive possible study of the integrational, educational, social and cultural phenomena in the field of special education, quantitative data were collected in tables representing of basic skills checklists (BSCL) and qualitative data into calendar records, transforming the spoken participatory systematic empirical interactions in written texts.



**Figure 3:** Participatory systematic empirical observation and special education training to students with autism.

The second research issue seems to be answered positively as far as students are concerned and partly positively as far as pupils are concerned because the formulation of realistic teaching priorities [2] is in line with PSEO. Thus, the educational action researchers in schools observed on a daily basis and recorded the external events and the behaviour of their students to make sure that the educational process proceeds smoothly but mainly to gain a bigger picture of what is happening in the classroom and is expressed in certain behaviours. This particular research method was used to evaluate populations that cannot express themselves verbally as is often the case with children who have not developed spoken language because of the nature of autism. With participatory, systematic empirical observation accurately recorded nonverbal forms of communication and interaction, as to how a student can interact in his class with others and in the schoolyard.

According to the researchers, it is pointed out that in order to determine the place where the observation will take place, the issues regarding: - [1] - what is the appropriate place where we can develop participatory systematic empirical observation in order to obtain the results required for the didactic intervention that we will apply. Furthermore, [2] - the limit of observing the social skills of a student with special learning difficulties in the classroom, or during a particular lesson, or during a particular lesson, or during the break, can be defined. The third issue refers [3] - to what kind of access the teacher has to the action research based on the subjects mentioned in the weekly timetable, as well as [4] - the accessibility of the educational supporter of a pupil with special educational needs or to some other reference framework such as the gym or the museum or private support at home. The last question [5] - is whether ethical dilemmas have been taken into account when visiting a certain place with a view to composing systematic empirical observation. In this, the British Association of Psychologists has issued a code of conduct stating that in order to observe behaviours of people with autism in a public place, their necessary consent and information is required if it is funded research. Thus,

the formulation of realistic teaching priorities resulted from observations that vary according to the extent to which the observer teacher of action research intervenes in the context in which the person with autism lives. A clear distinction is required between non-intrusive and intrusive observation. In the results, the PSEO was characterized as interventional observation because the interest of the action research focused on exploring how to intervene and support the person with autism within the school or academic community. For this reason, immediately after the end of the teaching intervention, the teacher who applies the action research noted the observations in order to recall the representations and details of these events that are of particular interest to him, recording in the form of teaching interaction verbatim the words of the student and the words they say themselves. It is important to keep notes with observations. These in some and certain behaviours help to understand aspects of the psyche of the person with autism and clearly raise the need for a certain teaching priority. In the school integration departments and in the individual SET sessions at the University, laboratory observation was used in order to determine the observation procedure according to the first phase of the TISDIPs-SET. The definition of teaching priorities was carried out jointly with the student and the student through qualitative observation which is basically descriptive where here the teacher participates in a systematic way without predetermined ideas about what he will encounter in interaction. Qualitative observation is of particular interest for teaching practice in the field of special education because it is possible to formulate realistic teaching goals by limiting possible exclusions due to the behaviours that accompany the disability of autism.

The results showed that it was very important how to conduct systematic empirical observations by recording the spontaneous narratives posed by the individuals themselves during the interaction. For this reason, four phases necessary for carrying out qualitative observation with the TISDIPs-SET were taken into account, in preparation for this observation and on the basis of a specific teaching research project based on a literature review that helps the action research. So, the teacher studied modern and relevant research by adopting the appropriate adaptations and differentiations in teaching interventions. The third phase was identified by the interpretation of the action researcher and collecting data with the content of self-observations in what he thinks, what is happening and what he is discussing with the other and is a key element that precedes the other information. Finally, the fourth phase referred to the formulation of realistic teaching objectives together after they have been explained as part of the findings on how this is understood within the performance of effective educational interventions. The comments, the interviews with the parents, the spontaneous narrations from the students as well as the discussions with the fellow teachers on the issues with autism were included in the targeted integration interventions.

## **DISCUSSION -CONCLUSIONS – PROPOSALS**

In participatory systematic empirical observation, the educational observer is integrated into the group of the class and participates in its activities, thus the emotional learning experienced by the observer teacher of the action research and recorded in the self-observations is as important as the recording of external events and recorded in the hetero-observations. In summing up the basic principles of PSEO which precede and define the teaching interventions in people with autism, the following points are noted [2] participates in several different and differentiated pedagogical ways, [3] observes while participating and supports people with autism, [4] takes notes for as long as he observes [5] conducts informal and sometimes formal interviews with students, [6] improves and structures notes better, and [7] writes the analysis of his notes in the form of extensive work, when needed.

However, it is not overlooked that the role of the participatory observer in a situation can create certain methodological problems as long as there is always a risk of losing its objectivity. Many ethical dilemmas are also raised in cases where the participatory observer finds it difficult to share his thoughts with other colleagues or even when it can witness illegal actions, which occurs in ethnographic research and is included in the basic disadvantages of experiential self-observations, trained in data collection through action research, particularly in observations which last a long time, more than three years, and which risk having difficulty interpreting and talking about their experiences with others in the community.

Finally, the concluding points, the difficulty of maintaining the necessary scientific reliability of PSEO when the behaviours observed as in the individual method of study are not relatively simple and clear to confirm the validity and reliability of the data. In these cases, it is concluded that the presence of the data would help multiple observers who may differ preferably in age and gender, so that findings can be cross-checked by other researchers and inaccuracies and interpretations are eliminated. It is also important to describe the context of the class or the individual SET sessions at the University in such a way that the findings from participatory systematic empirical observation can be seen, felt and studied by the next reader. Moreover, observations can be made in different contexts, at different times, in different timetables firstly, on different days and at different times on the same day as well as in different months of the year. These may be combined with other intervention research methods such as interviewing with parents, administering simple questionnaires to check them out the disadvantages and advantages encountered in the systematic empirical observation of equity.

In conclusion, it is proposed to extend the systematic empirical observation in relation to teaching interventions to people with autism with emphasis on narrative discourse to pupils and students, it is suggested that the ways of evaluating academic performance should include the spontaneous discourse that emanates from the narrative even as mythical discourse. In the case of PSEO of speech where images or objects are used in the process, when this does not include the element of imitation and the speech is not characterized as spontaneous, it is proposed to observe and record the visual stimuli and evaluate them for their suitability. Images are often identified with visual meaning facilitators and it is suggested that they be examined for the specific linguistic stimuli they offer in adapted teaching interventions. Moreover, the images and photographs used and derived from the favourite objects of people with autism are suggested to be observed and investigated further by looking at their contribution to the possibility of developing and improving speech regardless of what they understand in a particular situation.

## THE ACRONYMS

- 1) [SET]: Special Education and Training
- 2) [SEN/Ds]: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- 3) [SEN]: Special Educational Needs
- 4) [PSEO]: Participatory Systematic Empirical Observation
- 5) [BSCL]: Basic Skills Checklists
- 6) [TISDIPs-SET]: Targeted by Individually Structured and Differentiated Didactic Integration Programs of Special Education Training.

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