Tony Attwood on Autism: "You are very lucky in Greece to have Haris Karnezi"

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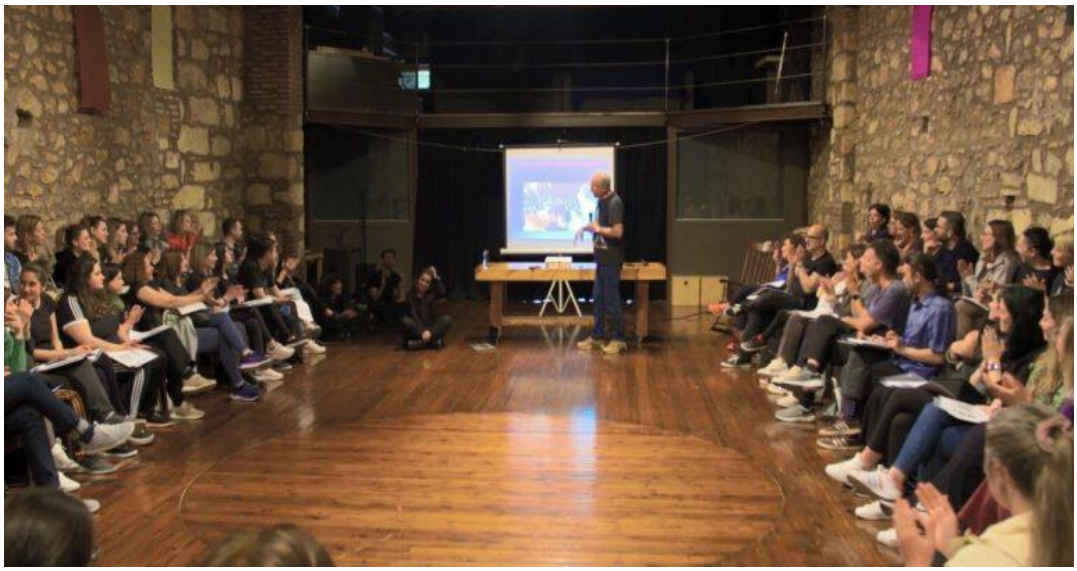
Written by Daphne Skalioni ***ERT NEWS***



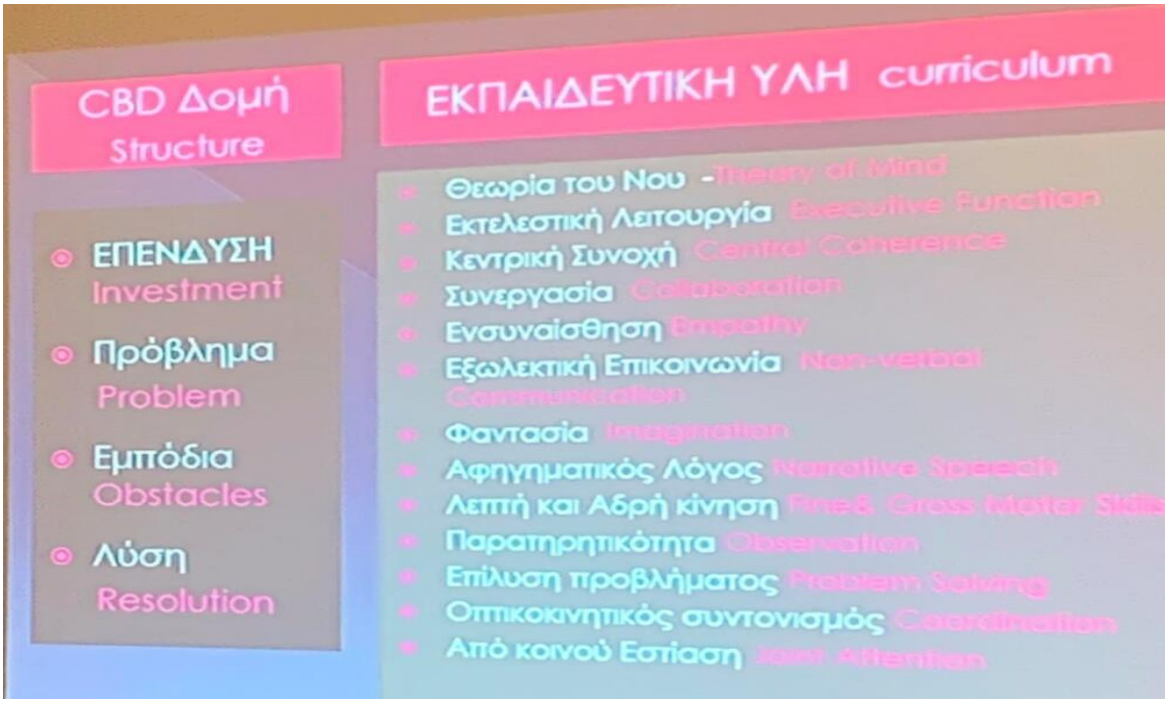
The innovative method of **Cognitive Behavioural Drama (CBD)**, created by Dr. Charis Karnezi — blending theatrical practice with the needs of children on the autism spectrum — was presented on Sunday, May 14th, in a six-hour masterclass for therapists and parents. The event took place at the Athens Drama School G. Theodosiadis (ART63 Art Space), in the presence of internationally renowned psychologist and autism expert **Professor Tony Attwood**.

A few words about Cognitive Behavioral Drama (CBD)

Cognitive Behavioral Drama (CBD) is based on scientific research conducted at Trinity College University in Ireland and is specifically designed to address the social and communication difficulties often faced by children with low self-esteem, phobias, ADHD, high-functioning autism (HFA), and Asperger's syndrome. It combines for the first time the art of theatre with principles and techniques from therapeutic methods of psychology, such as cognitive and behavioral, taking into account the needs of these children.

How does it work in practice?

Children are invited to participate experientially in exciting stories and to overcome a series of challenges, such as discovering the lost treasure, finding the magical place with chocolate streams, mountains of ice cream, rivers of chewing gum, and trees with candies, flying on magic carpets, solving the riddle of the disappearance of the little wizard, creating their own business. These challenges aim to help children develop social and communication skills but also to overcome personal difficulties such as phobias, anxieties, stereotypes, resistance to change, and lack of self-confidence.



“The common denominator in all is motivation. Either to perform a desired behavior or overcome a phobia,” explains the creator of the method, Dr Haris Karnezi. “We don’t have a red pen here to point out the mistakes. We highlight what’s right and hand control of the therapy to the child.”

For this study, Haris was funded by the Irish State Council for Special Education while at the same time awarded the postgraduate research prize of the University of Dublin.

The experience of the masterclass

The goal of the masterclass was to better understand the needs and difficulties faced by children and adolescents on the autism spectrum, as well as how to address these difficulties through this innovative psycho-educational model.

And what better way for those of us lucky enough to be there, to understand an experiential method — than to actually live it? So we had the chance not just to watch, but to 'play' — in every sense of the word — in an interactive mystery performance. Together, we unraveled the thread of the story, mapping out the meeting paths between two seemingly incompatible worlds.

We were guided to experience firsthand the complexity of the unwritten social rules that many of us take for granted — and to recognize the distance and the journey one needs to follow in order to decode them. And when we raised our eyes to behold this "map,"insightt ws revealing!

The realization of how educational content for autism can be woven into an interactive story that truly engages children was just one of the insights we gained.

"Today I confirmed that **everything I do in my speech therapy practice is wrong,**" boldly stated one participant.

"I'm shocked because I didn't expect what I experienced today to be so **impressively ingenious**," said another therapist.

"**We did everything wrong**! We talked to the children by giving information. The whole approach is wrong!" exclaimed a third, visibly shaken.

A mother asked for the floor to make a confession that brought many in the room to tears: "My son is on the spectrum. For five years, **today was the first time I saw how he sees us. All this time, I was trying to make him see how we are**. I was wrong!"

Tony Attwood: "You are very fortunate in Greece to have Charis!"

"Too often we insist on treating autism through a neurotypical lens, from the perspective of typical development. **But autism is like a different culture.** It's different, not defective!" emphasized Tony Attwood.

"You are very fortunate in Greece to have Haris! **I don't know anyone else in the world doing this**!" the distinguished psychologist—renowned for his work on Asperger's syndrome—exclaimed with enthusiasm. "This morning I looked out my window and saw the Acropolis, a symbol of ancient Greece. And now I think: this is the new philosophy…

Philosophy is returning to Greece!" he added. "In this method, Haris has embedded the educational curriculum within a child-friendly intervention. It represents **a true paradigm shift!**" Attwood concluded.

"The most important criterion for any program's success," Attwood noted, **"is that the child actually wants to attend."** And, as confirmed by the attending parents whose children go on "missions" and solve mysteries with Dr Karnezi or a member of her team, the kids can't wait for the next "episode."

"They go to a place to solve mystery stories—like an escape room, not a therapy session," Karnezi explained.
"That's what motivates them to engage in the therapeutic process - "They get an extra shot of experiential knowledge — the kind they missed out on in their early years."

The key element that Attwood recognized in the interactive performance / model CBD session, was the self-esteem and sense of self-identity that the children build.
"No matter how chaotic the world may be, there are steps you can take and succeed. You learn who you are and what you need to do. It's ironic that we learn realism through theatre!' **he said.**

The Importance of Experiential Learning
It is crucial for the child to discover on their own, not for us to show them. “The worst environment for an autistic child to learn in is sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher,” Attwood pointed out. “You teach something to them in a room, and the knowledge stays there. With this method, the great advantage is that the experiential knowledge generalizes— the child takes it with them and makes it their own. “What Harris managed to do was build on all the theoretical knowledge but become very creative in the activities. **The experiential approach is the way to go!”**

As the distinguished psychologist explained, when we merely listen to something it doesn’t register—especially when there is an attention deficit. Most knowledge is boring, but what we experienced was exhilarating. Kinesthetic memory is activated by action, and emotional memory by the enjoyment of the experience. Furthermore, learning is reinforced by personal reward through the achievement of a goal.

“One audience member, who – despite being neurotypical – suffered greatly in school and found it boring, remarked that she would love to see this method integrated into education for all children. Indeed, everyone needs acceptance, encouragement,

and admiration, **and experiential learning is both more effective—and more enjoyable—for everyone!"**

Building on that observation, Tony Attwood closed the session by urging us not to keep what we'd learned and felt in that room to ourselves:

"Those of us who were here today have a responsibility: to pass on this information, **and ignite a movement**, —so everyone can see that this works and why it's so necessary!"

The CBD team supporting Dr. Haris Karnezi in the interactive performance/simulation of the Cognitive Behavioral Drama session consists of: Evi Andrianou, actress/pedagogue specialized in special education; Manolis Dragatsis, actor/educator; Giannis Filippou, actor/theater pedagogue; Athina Stamouli, special educator; Konstantina Psomadelli, specialized physical education teacher; Natalia Glezou, musician/pedagogue; and Eleni Gavgiotaki, speech therapist. In the photo, they are pictured together with Tony Attwood and the handmade puppet Elisa, whose role in the performance was pivotal.