

Mobile Unit for the Diagnosis and Support of Learning Difficulties of the Hellenic Mediterranean University: A University–Local Government Partnership for the Protection of Child Rights

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Abstract

Children with learning difficulties who do not receive timely intervention are at increased risk for anxiety, low self-esteem, school refusal, emotional difficulties, and various behavioral problems. Delays in identification and insufficient family support are also associated with significant psychological burden for parents and crises in family relationships. Lack of information, fear of stigma, and, in some cases, financial hardship often prevent families from seeking timely assessment and support services. Recognizing the gap in prevention and mental health promotion services for children and adolescents, and the serious social implications, the Hellenic Mediterranean University established in 2020-with funding from the Region of Crete (MIS 5162111)-the first nationwide Mobile Unit for Learning Difficulties and ADHD. The unit aims for comprehensive assessment of learning, social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties in primary school children and provides short-term individualized counseling support to their families. Staffed by specialized professionals (special education teachers, child psychologists, child psychiatrists, social workers, speech therapists), the mobile unit visits remote areas of Crete by appointment, identifies the nature, depth, and extent of problems using validated psychometric tools, and develops personalized support plans, offering free sessions for children and parents to address learning difficulties at home. To date, over 400 families have participated, with approximately 70% from remote areas of Crete. The unit has reached individuals with low literacy, poor financial status, and those in geographically isolated areas who could not otherwise access support. It has also reduced waiting times for children, relieved families, and lessened the burden

on educators. A significant benefit is the early detection of psychopathological symptoms. This initiative provides important evidence for the effectiveness of university–local government partnerships in promoting and protecting child rights.

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Presentation language: English X Greek ☐

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Mrs. Stavroula Lioliou, a PhD candidate at the Hellenic Mediterranean University, holds a Psychology degree from Aristotle University and a Master's in Child and Adolescent Psychology from Leiden University. She specialized in disability education and trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Since 2014, she has collaborated with LaHeRS Lab on EU projects and education, while also working in special education, focusing on assessing children with special educational needs since 2015.

Ms Kyriaki Vagionaki earned her Bachelor's degree in Social Work from the Hellenic Mediterranean University in 2020 and a Master's in Public Health from the University of Crete in 2022. Since 2020, she has been a member of the LaHeRS Lab team. Her work focuses on child and youth safety, counseling juvenile offenders, and designing community interventions addressing issues like child abuse, youth aggression, and infodemic management among vulnerable populations.

Dr. Nikolaos Bitsakos is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Crete and his research relates to issues of sociology in education. He holds a Master's degree in Political Analysis and Public and European Policies from the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Crete.

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