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Table of Contents

TITLE: MIGRATION – A PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE 4
Amita Valmiki 4

MORE A TIME FOR REFLECTION THAN CELEBRATION: A CENTENARY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CASE OF UNISA (THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA). 8
Andrew Manson 8

Health Education in Times of Ebola Virus Epidemic in Sierra Leone 9
Anthoni Jeorge 9

Marriage satisfaction dynamics of parents of children with autism: A mixed method study 19
Cem TÜMLÜ, Ramazan AKDOĞAN 19

Women in Society, Education and Empowered in African Context 20
Dolapo Adeniji-Neill 20

Inferiority feelings and loneliness mediate between perception of loneliness and subjective happiness 21
Elif Cimsir, Ramazan Akdoğan 21

AESOP'S "MYTHS" AND HAGIOGRAPHIC TEXTS. PARALLEL READING 22

Introductory note 22
Emmanouil Doundoulakis 22

Exploring method of Performance Evaluation in Online Learning, Center of open secondary schools in Korea- 28
Eun-Chul Lee 28

Afghan Conflict and Education: A Bleak Future for Afghans 29
Imtiyaz Gul Khan 29

Trilingualism in Kazakhstan: how school teachers are prepared for the transition 39
Kairat Kurakbayev, Dina Gungor, Adil Ashirbekov 39

Differences in the Attitude amongst Special Education Teachers towards the Inclusion of the Intellectually Disabled in the Kingdom of Bahrain 40
Maryam I AlSherawi 40

Art as tolerance 46
Nina Bae 46

Anticipating the Individual and Social Perspective of Bilingualism 47
Norehan Hussin 47

Exploring Challenges for Faculty teaching online doctoral cohorts 55
Pamela Lee and Lorrie McGovern 55

Integrated business, social and cultural development: the case of education partnerships in Te Tai Tokerau 68

Marriage satisfaction dynamics of parents of children with autism: A mixed method study

Cem TÜMLÜ, Ramazan AKDOĞAN

The lives of parents of children with autism are unique and challenging just like those of children with autism (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). With the diagnosis, the child becomes the center of the world of their parents (Hoogsteen & Woodgate, 2013) and encompasses almost all of their daily lives (Hartley, et al., 2010). Often parents are left alone to cope with the difficulties that autism create in their lives due to the stereotypes, insufficient social system, and spousal problems (Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). The situation leads to disputes between the spouses over time (Hartley et al. 2010), and the challenges that they experience include interruption of communication, allocation of less time to each other, not being able to receive sufficient support and intimacy from their spouses (Hoffman et al., 2009), which negatively affect their marriage satisfaction. Decreased marriage satisfaction can often lead to situations ending up with divorce (Gau et al. 2012). On the other hand, for some couples, having a child with autism can have a positive impact on their marriage (Lloyd and Hasting, 2008). As a matter of fact, spouses can become more understanding toward each other, show increased empathy and experience more intimate and sincere partner support (Stoneman and Gavidia-Payne, 2006).

This study was conducted to examine if there was a difference between the marriage satisfaction of parents with children with autism and those with normal children. Also aimed in this study was to reveal the predictors of marriage satisfaction of parents of children with autism through both qualitative and quantitative data. Using Marriage Satisfaction Scale (Tezer, 1996) and Spousal Support Scale (Yıldırım, 2004), quantitative data were collected from the parents of 147 children with autism and 142 children without autism, which were then analyzed through *t*-test and regression analyses on IBM SPSS-22 (2013) program. Qualitative data, which were analyzed using content analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2007) were collected from 9 fathers and 12 mothers through 3 sessions of focus group meetings.

Quantitative data suggest that emotional support [$t(287)=2.06$, $p<.05$], appreciation [$t(287)=2.5$, $p<.01$], and social support [$t(287)=2.20$, $p<.05$] that the parents of children with autism reported experiencing are lower than those of the parents of normal children. Also, while there are four marriage satisfaction predictors that are important for the mothers of children with autism, which are emotional support, appreciation, social support, and financial support, respectively, the most important one for the fathers' marriage satisfaction was appreciation. While the four predictors of marriage satisfaction of the mothers accounted for 65% of the variance ($R=0.806$, $R2=0.65$, $p<.01$); appreciation for the fathers accounted for 45% of the variance ($R=0.670$, $R2=0.45$, $p<.01$). Qualitative findings suggest that, "coming to terms with the child's disability" and "the level of sharing aside from that for the parent role" emerged as important themes in marital satisfaction for both fathers and mothers. Major themes of marriage satisfaction emerged as "sharing the responsibility of the child", "being left alone", and "the level of emotional sharing" for the mothers; and "being appreciated" and "communication problems" for the fathers.